

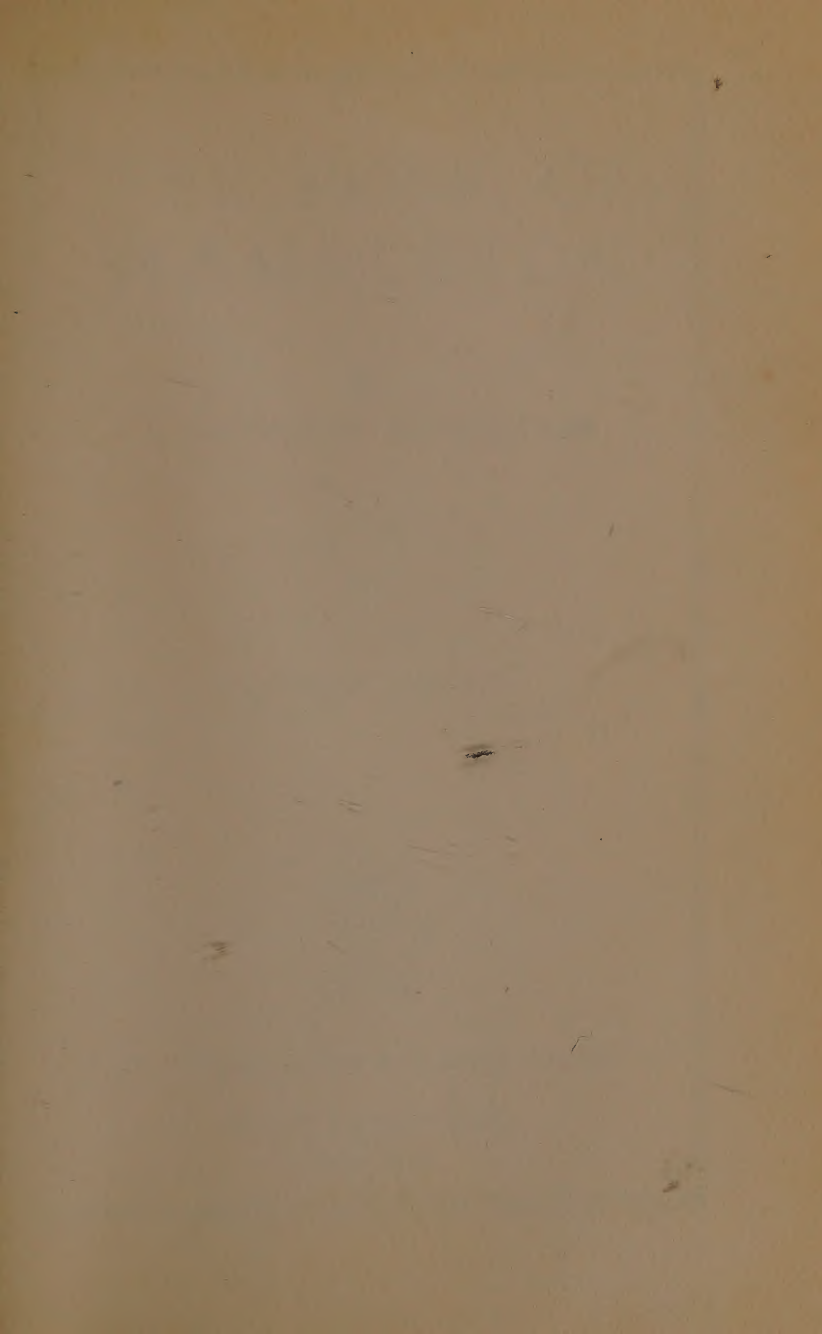


bc

PZ 3 .L759 Mo

Livingston, Armstrong, 1885-

The monk of Hambleton



THE MONK OF HAMBLETON

By
ARMSTRONG LIVINGSTON

MYSTERY LIBRARY



WORLD LIBRARY GUILD
NEW YORK

3
.L759
Mo

Copyright, MCMXXVIII, by
RAE D. HENKLE CO., INC.

Printed in the United States of America
by
THE COMMERCIAL BOOKBINDING CO.
CLEVELAND, OHIO

I: Saying It With Fruit

THE weather-beaten buildings that comprised the plant of the Varr and Bolt tannery occupied a scant five acres of ground a short half-mile from the eastern edge of the village of Hambleton. They were of old-type brick construction, dingy without and gloomy within, and no one unacquainted with the facts could have guessed from their dilapidated and dejected exteriors that they represented a sound and thriving business. It was typical of Simon Varr, that outward air of shabbiness and neglect; it was said of him that he knew how to exact the last ounce of efficiency from men and material without the expenditure of a single superfluous penny.

An eight-foot board fence surrounded the property on three sides, the fourth being bounded by a sluggish, disreputable creek whose fetid waters seemed to crawl onward even more slowly after receiving the noisome waste liquor from the tan-pits. At only one point, that nearest the village, did any of the buildings touch the encircling fence. There its sweep was broken by the façade of a squat two-story structure of yellow brick which contained the offices of the concern and the big bare room in which a few decrepit clerks pursued their uninspiring labors. Admission to this building, and through it to the yard, was by way of a stout oaken door on which the word *Private* was stencilled in white paint. Just above the lettering, at the height of a man's eyes, a small Judas had been cut—a comparatively recent innovation to judge from the freshness of its chiselled edges.

On the afternoon of a warm, late-summer day a number of men—twenty-five or thirty—were loitering outside this door in various attitudes of leisure and repose. They were a sorry, unkempt lot, poorly clothed and unshaven, sullen of face and weary-eyed. When they moved it was languidly, when they spoke it was with brevity, in tired, toneless voices. All of them looked hungry and many of them were, for it was the end of the third week of their strike.

The faintest flicker of animation stirred them as they were presently joined by a roughly-dressed man who sauntered up from the direction of the village, though it is safe to suppose that some of them were moved to interest less by the newcomer himself than by the fact that he was carrying a huge ripe tomato in one hand. He nodded a greeting that was returned by them in kind, and it was some moments before the most energetic of their number crystallized their listless curiosity in a single question.

"Any news, Charlie?"

"Nothin' to git excited about."

"I seen you talkin' to Graham a while ago."

"Uh-huh. Graham's a good sport even if he is standin' in with th' bosses."

"He's only lookin' out for himself," said the spokesman judicially, and tightened his belt by one hole. There was a murmur of assent from the others. "A man has to in this world."

"Uh-huh. And that's why we're strikin' now for a livin' wage and decent workin' conditions. We're just lookin' out for ourselves because no one else will."

"Don't see as we're gettin' 'em," ventured a pessimist mournfully. "Graham say anythin'?"

"Said we'd oughter give in. That's what we'd ex-

pect *him* to say, ain't it? But I was talkin' to one of the clerks, feller named Stevens, and *he* says that there's a lot of big orders on th' books that ain't goin' to be filled if we don't go back to work. Reckon that'll give old Varr somethin' to think about!"

They contemplated this hopeful scrap of information in a silence broken finally by the pessimist, who contributed a morsel of personal history by no means as irrelevant to the subject as it sounded.

"Wimpelheimer just shook his head when I went to him this noon for a bit of meat. He was nice enough about it, but he says three or four fellers left town last week owin' him money an' he can't figure noways how we're goin' to win this strike. He's lookin' out for himself, too!"

"Uh-huh." Charlie's favorite expression of agreement was slightly blurred by a mouthful of tomato. "Varr owns Wimpelheimer's store. If he catches Wimpy bein' too accommodatin' to us chaps he's fixed to make trouble for *him*." He nodded portentously. "Get it?"

"Seems as if Varr owns th' hull blame village of Hambleton, barrin' a few things he's only got a mortgage on," drawled another speaker. He went on musingly to quote a local aphorism. "What Varr says, *goes!*"

"That's right," concurred the pessimist glumly. "I reckon we took on a pretty big contract when we started to buck Simon Varr!" He wagged his head despondently. "Why—a man might as well try to buck *Garwd!*"

Charlie's face came out from behind the tomato and his eyes swept the other with fiery scorn. "Gettin' cold feet, huh? Mebbe you'd like to git down on your knees an' crawl back to th' old skinflint?"

The rest of us started out to do somethin' an' I guess we'll stick. Ain't that so, boys?" There was a low murmur of assent. "We'll win, too—cry-baby!"

"You'd better hope so, Charlie Maxon!" flashed the object of his derision. "You talked us into this strike in the beginnin', more than any one else did, an' if we have to go back to work on th' old terms *your* name is goin' to be *mud*!"

"Talked you into it, did I? All right, then—I did! What of it? Afraid I'm goin' to quit on you, huh? Well, I'm not. If I talked you into it, I'll get you *out* of it—with more pay an' better conditions." His voice hardened to a threatening note. "What's more, we ain't goin' back on th' old terms or th' old conditions, neither. You heard tell of th' fire that started in C buildin' t'other night, didn't you? Said it was an accident, didn't they? Well, mebbe it was an' mebbe it wasn't. Mebbe there's others who wouldn't be sorry to see th' tannery go up in smoke! An' as for Simon Varr, before I'd go back to work for him at the old scale I'd catch him by himself some night an'—"

"Here he comes now!" broke in somebody abruptly.

Maxon, his harangue cut short, followed the gaze of all of them. Coming toward them some fifty yards away, not from the direction of the village but from a short-cut through the woods that led from the tannery to his house on the hill, was the familiar, thickset, gray figure of the man they had been discussing. They watched him draw near for a moment, then quietly broke up into groups of two and three and drifted silently away. Maxon lingered to the last from a spirit of sullen bravado, but he had no wish to encounter his late employer face

to face and he, in turn, followed his comrades in retreat.

Simon Varr watched them go from beneath his shaggy, scowling eyebrows, and his thin lips relaxed their usual tightness to curve in a contemptuous sneer. Jackals!

He marched steadily to his objective, the door of the offices, and was raising his hand to knock when there was the sound of an iron bar sliding back and the door opened. Since the fire to which Maxon had referred, it had been deemed advisable to employ a watchman by night and a guard by day to protect the property from either accident or sabotage. It was the day-man who had recognized his employer through the Judas and drew the bar.

"Good afternoon, sir," he ventured politely.

Simon Varr was not accustomed to respect any amenity of social intercourse and he paid no more attention now to the greeting than if it had never been uttered. He merely glanced sharply at the man and snapped a curt question.

"Well, Nelson—any trouble?"

"No, sir. There's been a bunch of them loungin' around outside and talkin' a lot; I was listenin' to them when you came along."

"Talking, eh? Who seemed to be doing the most of it?"

"Well, sir, I'd say that—"

He was not destined to say it at that moment, however, for his remarks were interrupted by an incident as annoying as it was unexpected. He and Varr were confronting each other in the open doorway while they spoke, and at this point some missile hurtled past their faces and thudded heavily against the planking of the door, where it burst with all the

enthusiasm of a hand-grenade. Startled, they sprang back; then, recovering from the shock, they discovered themselves quite uninjured in body if somewhat damaged in raiment. They were liberally bespattered from head to foot with the lifeblood of an overripe tomato.

Nelson vented his indignation in a mild oath, Varr relieved his feelings in an angry snarl. The tanner wheeled swiftly in an effort to detect the author of the outrage, but his eyes showed him only a small knot of men, their hands thrust ostentatiously in their pockets, whose snickers died away as he gazed at them grimly. He grunted disdainfully, motioned the guard to precede him, and closed the door behind them as they entered the building. They busied themselves briefly with handkerchiefs.

"I'd like to have the tannin' of their ugly hides!" muttered Nelson.

"Charlie Maxon was eating a tomato as I came across from the path," commented Varr, more to himself than to his companion. "He put his hands behind his back to hide it from me, but he was too slow. Umph! He'll wish he'd never seen that tomato, let alone thrown it at me, before I'm through with him!"

"Maxon, sir?" The mention of the name reminded Nelson of his unfinished report. "Why, it was him that was doin' all the talkin'!"

"It was, eh? Umph."

"More than that, sir, he was makin' threats."

"Threats! What sort of threats?"

"Nothing very definite, sir, but it sounded to me as if he'd be glad enough to set fire to this place if he got a good chance—and he said he wouldn't come

back to work at the old wages, not if he had to catch you by yourself some night."

"Catch me by myself—! And *then* what?"

"That was as far as he got, sir. They saw you comin' then and he didn't say anything more."

"Ah!" There was derision in the monosyllable, but a thoughtful expression in the hard gray eyes indicated that Varr had found food for reflection in Nelson's story. What direction his thoughts were taking he did not choose to reveal at the moment, but shot another question at the watchman instead.

"Doesn't Maxon wear a dark-blue flannel shirt?"

"Usually, sir; he had on a gray one to-day."

"Ah!" It was a note of triumph this time.

"Have you seen Steiner this afternoon?"

"Steiner, sir? The Chief of Police?"

"The Chief of Police—certainly! Not the Sultan of Turkey!"

"No, sir, I haven't. But this is about the time he turns up every day to see that things are quiet."

"Watch out for him. Tell him I want to speak to him. I'll be upstairs in my office."

"Yes, sir."

They parted with no further remarks. Nelson made a cautious preliminary survey of the outer world to satisfy himself that no more tomatoes were to be apprehended, then opened the door, placed a chair upon the threshold, and settled to the enjoyment of a freshly-filled pipe while waiting for Steiner to put in an appearance. Varr strode to the farther end of the hallway and climbed the flight of narrow, rickety stairs which led to the upper floor.

This was normally the scene of quiet and orderly activity, where the day's work was done to the clicking of typewriters and the hum of subdued voices,

but now the rooms were empty and the only sound to be heard was the heavy tread of Varr himself as he walked through the main office to the small room where his own desk was located. He frowned at the difference, and sniffed discontentedly at the stale air which seemed already to have taken on the peculiar flat mustiness appropriate to closed and deserted habitations. He frowned again when he drew his finger along a desk and noted the depth of the furrow it had made in the dust.

A reasonable man—Simon emphatically was not—would have allocated to himself some share of the blame while scowling at the empty chairs and dusty furnishings of the office. It was he who was primarily responsible. It was he who had decreed that the clerical force should be laid off without pay for the duration of the strike.

"They'll have nothing to do—why should we pay 'em to do it?"

Jason Bolt, a minor partner in the business by virtue of some money he had put into it at a critical period in its early development, had protested mildly and ineffectually.

"It wasn't their fault, this strike. If we do that it's going to make them mighty sore."

"Sore at us—but it'll make 'em *hate* the strikers!"

"It will work a hardship on them—they need their salaries."

"If they don't like it let them find other jobs."

"They can't, Simon—there aren't any in Hambleton."

"Then let 'em move to another village—there isn't one of them who'd be a real loss to the community."

"They can't do that, either; they're all family

men and they can't pull up stakes and shift at a minute's notice."

"Then they'll stay here and do the best they can until we're ready to whistle 'em to heel again. So much the better. Nothing breaks a strike quicker than adverse public opinion—and those clerks are going to provide a lot of that when they begin to feel the pinch. I'm giving you a lesson, Jason, not only in economy, but in strategy!"

"Just the same—I don't like it."

Simon Varr's eyebrows had gone up a full inch and dropped again.

"You don't like it?" he retorted ironically. "Well, I *do*—and what I say, *goes!*"

Which had ended the debate, since he spoke the simple truth.

He blew the dust from the finger that he had trailed along the desk and entered the small office that was his sanctum. Seated at his ancient roll-top, he opened and read a handful of letters that had come in the afternoon mail—and his ready frown was active again as he noted the tone of some of them. The clerk, Stevens, when he told Maxon that several orders were shortly due to be filled, had in nowise exaggerated the case. Two or three were already overdue, and irate gentlemen in distant cities were beginning to make inquiries more pertinent than polite. Varr threw the letters on his desk and swore at the writers.

The light in the office suddenly became dim; Simon rose irritably and went to the single window, where he raised the green shade to its greatest height. Storm-clouds rolling up from the west had obscured the descending sun so that the countryside, with its rolling fields of grain and patches of thick woodland,

which a moment since had been laved in a golden flood, now looked grim and gray beneath the deepening shadows. The tanner studied the gloomy prospect with angry eyes, finding in it some reflection of his own situation, and the face which he raised to the heavens was as black as the clouds themselves.

His was the startled, half-uncomprehending fury of the bull at the first stinging dart of the picador. Domineering and ever dominant, he had been accustomed throughout his life to impose his will upon others. Shrewd and capable in his chosen business, successful in the limited area of his activities, he had come perilously close to believing himself omnipotent, not only in all that pertained to his own destiny, but in the destinies of those about him. Never until the last few weeks had either men or events dared to march contrary to his wish, whereas now they appeared to have entered deliberately into a conspiracy to defy their master and defeat his plans.

Well—conspiracies can be crushed! His jaw set, his thin lips tightened and his powerful hands clenched until the nails on his stubby fingers sank deep into the flesh of his palms. Let 'em match their wits and their wills against his—he would show 'em!

He was so rapt in thought that he did not hear a heavy step in the outer office and was unaware that he had a visitor until a voice spoke respectfully from the threshold of his room.

"Mr. Varr—Nelson said you wished to see me."

The tanner started and turned from the window. "Oh—it's you, Steiner." He walked to his desk and seated himself solidly in his swivel chair. "Come in."

The Chief of Police—Chief by virtue of two sub-

ordinate constables—obeyed a command, rather than accepted an invitation. He was a tall man, slender of build but wiry, a little past middle-age, with hair beginning to gray at the temples, pale blue eyes and lantern jaws. As a policeman he was a singularly unconvincing figure, yet he had served creditably enough for five years in the peaceful village of Hambleton, where an occasional speeding motorist or some native exalted by too much home-brew constituted the whole criminal calendar for a year. A quiet job for a quiet man.

Varr did not offer him a chair, so he stood patiently waiting, twirling in his hands the uniform cap that he had removed in deference to his surroundings.

"Last night," began the tanner abruptly, "some one trespassed on my property and committed material damage—or to put it more plainly, some one entered my kitchen garden, picked a considerable quantity of my best tomatoes, helped himself to a couple of dozen ears of sweet corn, and incidentally trampled down and destroyed quite a number of plants in the process. I strongly suspect that he did the last intentionally, out of pure malice."

"Why, sir, that's a singular thing to have happen," commented Steiner as the other seemed to pause. "I don't expect it was any one in Hambleton, sir. It might have been a tramp."

"It might have been, but it wasn't. It was Charlie Maxon, who used to work for me and never shall again. I want you to take the necessary steps to effect his arrest. I intend to prosecute him and hope he will be punished to the full extent of the law. It's time Charlie Maxon and a few of his friends were taught that I'm a bad man to play tricks on!"

"Maxon, sir?" Steiner seemed more thoughtful

than surprised. "I think he has been one of the more active men in agitating this strike of yours. A bright enough chap with a queer streak running through him."

"Umph. Well, I'm going to put him where his queer streak can't get loose and run amuck in my garden." He caught an expression of hesitancy in the policeman's eyes. "Eh? What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking, sir—are we sure of proving it against him? Mebbe we'd better go slow. If I arrest him, like you say, and the case falls down, he'd have a cause for action—"

"Idiot!" snapped Varr. "Don't you suppose I know that?" He thrust his hand into his breast-pocket. "Of course I have plenty of proof."

He produced a heavy wallet and opened it. From one of its compartments he took a small, triangular bit of blue cloth and, with the habitual impatience that marked his every speech and gesture, he threw it at Steiner, who caught it deftly in his cap.

"The man who looted my garden was afraid to use the gate for fear he'd be seen from the house. He came and went through the barbed-wire fence and left that as a souvenir. It's a piece of a flannel shirt, like the one Maxon usually wears. Get his shirt and match this to the hole you'll find in it—see? Then take his everyday shoes and fit 'em to the footprints he left in my tomato patch—I've had two of 'em covered with glass bells so they won't be washed away if it rains. That will be all the evidence you need. Understand?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Well—what is it now?"

"It's this, sir—I guess I ought to tell you that there's a lot of feeling in the village over this strike,

and most of it favors the strikers. Maxon would get a bunch of sympathy. S'pose he comes out and says he took those tomatoes because he was hungry? It may be wrong to steal, but there's people who will say you're persecuting him and they'll set him up as a martyr. I—I'm looking at it from your interest, sir—"

"Indeed! Thank you, Steiner—thank you very much!" Varr was never more disagreeable than on the rare occasions when he chose to be studiously polite. "In return, let me suggest something that has to do with your own best interests. You are employed here to preserve law and order and this is decidedly a matter for your official attention—unless, indeed, you are thinking of resigning from the force on the chance that I may offer you a position as confidential adviser to myself. Eh?"

Cold gray eyes held and mastered pale blue ones. There was a brief silence—a silence that lasted just long enough for Steiner to reflect that he owed his job to the Board of Selectmen and that the Selectmen pretty much owed theirs to Simon Varr. Then he cleared his throat nervously.

"Of course, you know best, sir. I'll act at once."

"Let me know when I'm to appear in the police court."

"Yes, sir. Is that all you want of me, sir?"

Varr did not answer, but there was dismissal in the abrupt way that he swivelled around to his desk and bent his head over his neglected correspondence.

II: The Head of the Trail

THE sound of the chief's subdued steps—in departing even his feet contrived to appear deferential—had barely died away when it was replaced by the noise of other and more determined ones ascending the stairs. The creaking of the ancient floor-boards heralded the approach of Jason Bolt, the junior partner, who passed by his own private office and entered Varr's.

He was a short, rotund little man of forty-five, smooth-shaven, somewhat sandy in complexion, with twinkling eyes that were friendly, and a light thatch of pinkish hair which was noticeably thinning on the top of his head. There was a general air of cheerfulness and content about him and his mouth, that was inclined to twitch at the corners, seemed continually on the point of smiling. In truth, the fairy godmother of Jason had presented him at birth with one of her choicest gifts, a sense of humor, and it had seldom failed him since. Beyond any possible doubt—as he had more than once pointed out to his wife Mary—he owed to this fine characteristic the fact that he had preserved his sanity of mind and body despite the twenty years of intimate association with his grim, self-centered partner.

He plopped down on a chair with a puffing sound of relief. He was panting a bit from the stairs, and his forehead was beaded with a moist tribute to the sultriness of the weather. He fanned himself gently with a stiff straw hat.

"Hello, Simon," he said presently, when return-

ing breath permitted him to speak. He did not expect any reply and continued without waiting for one. "Gosh, I've just had quite a shock!"

"Did, eh? What was it?"

"The sight of our usually immaculate, if unpainted front door. I saw that rich crimson stain, then observed Steiner coming out looking very businesslike, and I made sure that some one had brained my noble partner against his own building."

"The shock coming when you stepped in here and discovered your mistake. Is that it?"

"No, Simon; Nelson told me that it was only Charlie Maxon saying it with catsup." His light voice grew more serious. "Just the same, a man who throws tomatoes to-day may throw bricks to-morrow."

"Not Maxon," cut in Varr. "Steiner has my orders to arrest him."

"Arrest him! On charges of assault with a tomato? It's hardly a deadly weapon unless it's green, and this one very obviously was not. A slap on the wrist and a reprimand is about all he will get for that."

Varr's chair revolved until he was facing his partner, at whom he directed a glance of angry impatience. "If you'd listen to me instead of chattering so much—! I'm charging him with trespass, theft and property damage." Curtly but clearly, he described the overnight raid on his garden and his reasons for believing Maxon the culprit. He noted the changing expression of Bolt's face as the story progressed, and when it was finished he asked, as he had asked the Chief of Police: "Well—what is it?"

"I'm thinking of the effect on public sentiment,"

answered the other gravely, his thoughts turning in the same direction that Steiner's had taken. "But of course that doesn't cut any ice with you—I know that. You'll do as you please regardless of consequences."

"I certainly will!"

"Do you know, Simon, that about twenty of our best men have left town in the last two weeks? I was talking to Billy Graham this afternoon and he'd been checking up."

"And making the worst of the situation, you may be sure!" Varr's face darkened as his heavy brows came together in one of his ready scowls. "If Graham has been watching the men, I've been watching him. I'm not so certain that his sympathy isn't with them, instead of with us, where it ought to be. Yesterday, I met that lanky daughter of his coming from the direction of Brett's house with an empty basket in her hand. I don't need three guesses to tell me what she'd been doing!" His lip curled. "Nice bit of business, eh? We're trying to break a strike, while our own manager rushes food to the strikers!"

"Brett's wife has been sick and there are two kids to be looked after. Sheila Graham probably remembered that and forgot everything else. Billy may not have known anything about it—or have been able to stop her if he did. Sheila is just as clever as she is pretty and generally gets her own way in everything; since her mother died three years ago she has been able to twist her father around her little finger. Smart girl."

"Entirely too smart!"

The words were uttered with so much passion that Jason Bolt moved uncomfortably on his chair,

reproaching himself with having been wanting in tact. There were good and sufficient reasons why Varr should react to the mention of the girl's name like a bull to a red rag, and here he had been stupid enough actually to praise the young woman whom the tanner had referred to contemptuously as Graham's lanky daughter. He opened his mouth with intent to change the subject, but an outburst from Varr forestalled him.

"You say she has her own way with her father. Exactly! Let me tell you, Jason, I've no use at all for a man who can't command obedience from his own children. That is something for my boy, Copley, to consider before he involves himself any more deeply with Sheila Graham—the daughter of one of my workmen of whose loyalty even I can't be certain!" Under his sense of irritation, as his resentment against those who were defying his wishes steadily increased, his voice grew louder and more harsh. "If that girl wants to ~~do~~ her father a bad turn, just let her continue to encourage that young fool! I was a wise man never to give Graham a contract! He's only on salary, and for two cents I'd give him a month's pay and throw him out!"

"Well, I hope you won't," ventured Jason cautiously. He seemed to spend most of his time debating whether the moment were propitious to reason with Varr or whether he were best left alone! "It would be awfully hard to replace Billy. You wouldn't have the satisfaction of knowing that you had hurt him much, either. He told me recently that the Thibault Tanneries have made him a very good offer to go to them. He'd better himself considerably."

"He would, eh? Why hasn't he accepted?"

"You know as well as I do, Simon. He has been with us for years, saved a fair bit of money, and he is hoping that some day we will see our way to giving him an interest in the business. A laudable ambition for any employee who wants to get on in the world. Even you can't criticize that!"

"Umph." Varr did not seem to think it necessary to express his views on ambition, but appeared to be reflecting on the news Jason had just given him. "The Thibault people, eh? In Rochester!" He raised one hand and caressed his chin softly. "So if I throw him out of here he will go to Rochester—taking that girl with him! Have you ever noticed—" He broke off abruptly, leaned forward and threw his voice into the outer office. "*Hello!* Is that you, Langhorn? What do you want?"

They had failed to hear the approach of a thin, middle-aged man who had come halfway across the main room from the head of the stairs before Varr had chanced to see him. He came the rest of the way now, and the fact that he stooped a little when walking lent him an odd air of furtiveness, which was somehow borne out by his narrow face, weak, irresolute chin and restless eyes. He was one of the clerks whom Varr had summarily suspended from the payroll, and there was anxiety in the gaze that shifted from one partner to another as he paused respectfully in the doorway.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Varr! Good afternoon, Mr. Bolt!"

"What do you want?" demanded Varr curtly, though a cruel light in his eye made it apparent that he knew the answer.

"Things are very hard, sir—"

"And you come to me for help? The more fool

you! I have made it plain that not a single employee of this concern shall draw a dollar of salary until those ungrateful pups who have struck come back to work on my terms. Go tell *them* your troubles! Tell 'em for me, too, that their time is getting short. I'm making inquiries already with a view to getting men to take their places."

"I wasn't just thinking of work in the office, sir. If you had something for me on the outside—something up at your house, perhaps—"

"I have nothing. Good day!"

The man waited a fraction of a second, his eyes mutely questioning Jason Bolt, who negatived their appeal by an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Slowly, the man withdrew.

"A sneaking hound!" Varr did not lower his voice, indifferent to whether the retreating clerk learned his opinion of him or not. "I have never liked him."

"He must have heard what you said about Graham," reflected Jason. "I'm rather sorry for that. He's quite capable of carrying tales to Billy that might lead him to misconstrue your attitude."

"Let him! I guess it won't be such an awful misconstruction at that! Graham was never farther in his life than this minute from his partnership."

"Well—of course—a partnership wouldn't quite march with my idea!" Jason Bolt lighted a cigar rather nervously as he broached a subject dear to his heart. "Not a partnership—no. But if we were to incorporate and borrow the capital we ought to have, he might reasonably expect a good block of stock on the most advantageous terms——"

"We — are — not — going — to — incorporate!" Varr's slow words carried the emphasis of sheer ex-

asperation. "I have told you before that I do not intend to do so."

"Still, Simon, our position warrants it—our increased business almost demands it—"

"I have said I won't!"

"Yes—yes, I heard you. I would not have brought up the subject now except that we will have an opportunity during the next week to get some dope on the possibilities. Judge Taylor can tell us all about the legal end of it, but Herman Krech can give us pointers on the practical side—"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Oh—didn't I tell you?" Artful Mr. Bolt's surprise was well simulated. "Why, he's a New York stockbroker who has made barrels of money. He married a girl named Jean Graham, an old friend of my wife's. Mary has tried two or three times to get them for a visit, and they are finally coming to-morrow for a week."

"He can stay a year for all of me." Varr brought his open hand down with a loud smack on the arm of his chair. "Once and for all, Jason, we are not going to incorporate!"

"We could expand and make a lot more money."

"We'll make more money without expanding!"

When a youngster at school, some one had told Jason Bolt that the constant dropping of water will in time wear away the hardest rock. He had never forgotten this valuable piece of knowledge, possibly because he had so frequently demonstrated its truth on the person of his unsuspecting partner. No one could argue Varr into doing anything, much less drive him, but Jason had more than once succeeded in overcoming that granite obstinacy by a species of gentle, persistent nagging. So adept had he become

in this delicate accomplishment that Simon Varr would have sworn at the end of a campaign that he had never deviated from the original purpose that had been his in the beginning.

"Well, anyway," tapped the drop of water, "it can't do a bit of harm to listen to what he has to say."

Varr shrugged his shoulders. The conversation had ceased to interest him. So, evidently, had his letters, for he thrust them from him with an air of finality as he rose to his feet and glanced at his watch. It was not yet very late, but with the waning of summer the days were growing perceptibly shorter and the light in the office where the two men were talking was already failing.

"I didn't see your car outside, Simon. Shall I give you a lift home? or would you rather walk?"

"I'll walk." Varr crossed the room and knelt before an old iron safe in the corner near the window, peering closely at the figures on the dial as he slowly turned the knob. In a moment the combination was complete and he pulled open the heavy door. "It occurred to me to-day that this was a poor place to leave my memorandum book. If some one succeeded in burning the building—as some one apparently wants to—it would be none too secure even in this safe."

Jason whistled softly. "Has that got the notes of your new formula in it, Simon?" He stared at the small red leather notebook which Varr took from a pigeonhole. "You're dead right to take that out of here! By the way, did you see that letter from the Larscom Leather Company? They say that the last order we shipped them—the batch we tanned by

your new process—is the best looking lot of leather they’ve ever had in their shops.”

“I guess it was,” acknowledged Varr calmly. He balanced the leather memorandum book on his hand, his expression softening for a moment as he regarded it and remembered the days and nights of toil represented in its closely filled pages. A metal nameplate on the cover caught his eye by reason of its dinginess. He breathed on it and rubbed it with the cuff of his suit. “Yes, Jason, here is proof enough that my brains in no way resemble a tomato. If you were capable of inventing the processes that I have noted here, you would be running a business of your own quite independent of me!”

“That’s very true, Simon.” To this particular type of jeer Bolt had grown accustomed, and if his eyes narrowed a trifle it was the only hint of resentment that he showed. “As a matter of fact, it’s just because you’ve got such a good thing in this new formula that I’m anxious for more elbow room.” He glanced about him with an air of dissatisfaction. “The business we’re doing warrants something better than this peanut stand!”

“I’m ready to buy your interest for ten times what you put in!” offered his partner dryly. “Will you accept?”

“I will not.” Jason stood up and clapped on his hat. “I must be off. Sure you won’t let me drive you home?” A shake of Varr’s head answered him. “Good night, then.”

He left the office and was halfway to the stairs when a sudden thought occurred to him and he retraced his steps.

“Say, Simon!”

“Well?”

"Where are you going to put that book?"

"This notebook? In my library desk at home, I suppose. Why in thunder do you want to know?"

"Well, you might drop dead during the night! Think how awkward it would be for me if your memoranda were missing, too!"

He grinned cheerfully and departed, satisfied that he had scored mildly in retaliation for some of the slights inflicted on him by Varr. He had once discovered that Simon Varr, for all his outward strength and ruthless nature, had an innate fear of death. This hitherto secret weakness had revealed itself some years before when double pneumonia had brought him dangerously close to the end of his mortal coil.

He fell back a pace, shaken, but recovered in time to hurl an acid comment or two at his tormentor's back. A derisive chuckle floated to his ears from the stairway.

Varr shut the safe and spun the dial, then picked up his hat and prepared to leave the building. He paused for a word with Nelson, who stood up and opened the outer door.

"Your instructions are to allow no one in except Mr. Bolt and myself. How does it happen that you permitted Langhorn to enter?"

"I knew he was one of the clerks and I thought—"

"Don't think. When does Fay relieve you?"

"At seven, sir."

"Tell him to keep a sharp watch. Instead of making his rounds at regular intervals he had better vary the elapsed time between them. It would be a good idea if he were to follow up one by another five minutes later."

"I see, sir. If any one is watching him, they'll

begin their mischief when he has just finished one round, and the second might catch them at work. Is that it, sir?"

"That is it. Keep it to yourself and Fay—no talking of it to some one who may spread the story."

"Certainly not, sir."

"What became of that bunch of hot-air artists who were out here?"

"They drifted away, sir—home, I expect. The last few of 'em left when Mr. Graham came along."

"Ah." Simon had asked about the men almost idly as his cold gaze swept the clearing before the door. He had been on the point of crossing the threshold when Nelson's casual remark stopped him short in his tracks. "Mr. Graham was here? When was that?"

"Not twenty minutes ago, sir."

"Twenty minutes ago?" Varr thought back, and his calculations brought a frown of annoyance to his brow. "Did he speak to you?"

"No, sir. I made sure at first that he was comin' here, but Langhorn had just left and he stopped Mr. Graham and spoke to him."

"Humph. Did they talk together long?"

"Five or ten minutes, sir."

"Could you hear what they said?"

"No, sir. They were too far away. Langhorn did most of the talkin' and I figured he was probably tellin' Mr. Graham a hard-luck story."

"No doubt you figured correctly," said Varr, neglecting, however, to add that in all likelihood Graham had listened to a tale of misfortune that concerned himself rather than the clerk. "What happened after that? Did they leave together?"

"N-no, sir." Nelson had begun to sense the pres-

ence of something important underlying the surface of this inquisition and he paused a moment to reflect before continuing. "It was Langhorn who left first. Mr. Graham stood still a while, lookin' in this direction as if he still meant to come over, then he turned and headed for town." A shrewd gleam lit the watchman's eye. "While he was facin' this way it struck me that he was lookin' red and sort of angry."

"Ah!"

The monosyllable served at once to express Varr's perfect apprehension of what had passed between the two men and to bring the present conversation to a close. He took his leave, ignoring Nelson's polite "good evening" after his usual custom, and strode swiftly off along the short-cut by which he had come an hour or two earlier. Irritation quickened his step no less than the threat of rain from the banking clouds in the western sky.

So Jason had been right. Langhorn had overheard that portion of their talk which concerned Graham and had promptly reported it to the man most interested. Malicious, mischief-making little sneak! And of course he had to walk smack into Graham just when he was in a mood to make trouble and blow the consequences! With any luck he wouldn't have encountered the other until resentment at the rebuff he had received had cooled, and caution succeeded anger!

Varr was in the humor these days to find in this trivial contretemps yet another example of the annoyances, large and small, to which he had been subjected lately—so persistently indeed that he was coming to believe himself the chosen target at which

some malefic Providence had elected to discharge every arrow of misfortune in its quiver.

Nothing seemed to go right any more; on the contrary, everything appeared to take a fiendish delight in going wrong—which in Simon's case meant largely that they were going in opposition to his wishes. He briefly recapitulated a few of his major troubles as he hurried along on his homeward way.

First, there was dissension in his household, where his son was in almost open rebellion against the paternal authority in the matter of Sheila Graham, supported, Varr guessed, by the mild approval of his mother. Second, there was the situation at the tannery, where a bunch of incipient lunatics had gone completely mad and struck against conditions that had previously been satisfactory to them and their fathers before them. Last, but by no means least, was the discontent in the office itself, what with a partner who had been bitten by the bug of ambition—! A much-abused, sorely-tried man raised angry eyes to Heaven and demanded of it, "*What next?*"

And as he literally lifted his gaze from the trail, seeking an answer in the sky, he saw something that halted him abruptly. He stood rooted in his tracks, his head thrust slightly forward, very much as a keen pointer freezes at the sight of game.

The path he was following was one that ascended by gentle gradients from the tannery to his big house on the crest of the low hill. A narrow strip of meadowland on the edge of the town was crossed, then the path, as it reached the rising ground, plunged into a deep belt of heavy woods that stretched away on each side for the distance of a mile or more; at the end, the trail crested a rather sharp acclivity be-

fore emerging from the trees and linking up with a graveled path that circled a kitchen garden in the rear of the house.

Varr had just reached the foot of this last ascent at the moment he looked up. Twenty yards ahead of him he could see the end of the path, marked by a pale oblong of sky set in a dark frame of foliage, but it was not that familiar sight which held him spellbound, started his pulse to beating quickly and momentarily stopped his breath on a painful gasp mingled of astonishment and fear.

Silhouetted against the sky was a tall figure dressed from head to foot in a black garment such as a monk might wear, but almost instantly Varr recognized that there was something in this costume that was out of keeping with the orthodox monastic habit. What the discrepancy might be he could not determine in those seconds of bewilderment, but he knew it existed. The outline against the light was clear-cut; there were the flowing line of the robe, and the conical shape of the hood, plain to be seen and unmistakable.

There were several reasons why the apparition—although he was habitually unimaginative outside the field of barks and chemicals it did not occur to Simon Varr in that first moment to doubt that this was truly a specter from another world—should startle him to the verge of sheer fright. To begin with, there was something suggestive of Death in that somber, motionless figure, and of death he had a horror. Then it had come so pat on his bitter question of “What *next?*” that it seemed indubitably an answer from some Power not of earth. Finally—there was something about the figure that wasn’t *right*—!

It spoke well for his spiritual courage that he was

able to control his nerves and conquer the trembling of his limbs within a few seconds, and at the same time determine a course of immediate action. If this were a human being it should be challenged; if it were a ghost, it should be laid! He kept his eye fixed on the figure and deliberately took a step toward it.

Instantly, the immobility of the being ceased. A long black arm was flung up and outward in his direction, a silent command to him to stay his steps.

His obedience was prompt, for now he knew what was wrong with the apparition. Instinct had told him that the monk was confronting him, regarding him closely, and the quick response to his attempted advance was evidence enough that his instinct had not lied.

His mouth went dry, his brow exuded beads of perspiration. The monk was facing him sure enough—and that was queer, for the monk *had no face!*

III: A Warning

FROM the shock of that gruesome discovery, Simon Varr reeled back both mentally and physically. Involuntarily, he threw up a hand to shield his eyes, then got the best of his terror and fell to rubbing them, pretending to himself that this had been the intention behind the gesture; doubtless their vision was blurred and had deceived him into thinking the unthinkable—

He dropped his hand presently, blinked once or twice and prepared to make a more careful scrutiny of the monk's appearance. He was balked in this courageous essay. The apparition, if such it were, had acted in accordance with tradition and had vanished. While his eyes were covered it had departed, whether to left or right or merely into thin air he could not tell. He did not debate the question, either—he simply thanked his stars it was gone!

It was with considerable reluctance that he resumed his way up the path, but the daylight at the end of the trail looked inviting and reassuring compared to the twilight in the woods and he covered the distance to the spot where the monk had stood in a sort of a dogtrot.

It was here that he made a fresh discovery as he collided rather heavily with some obstruction in the path, an obstruction that gave way as his body impinged upon it, but that nearly tripped him as it fell between his legs.

He picked it up, but did not pause to examine it. The light ahead still lured and he continued his flight toward it, bearing his find with him.

He drew a deep breath of thankfulness as he finally emerged from the woods into the comforting aura of the kitchen garden; his eyes rested upon and were wonderfully soothed by a row of peaceful cabbages. Never before had he noticed how beautiful a cabbage can be, but to a man fresh from dalliance with a ghost there is something very steadying and sustaining in a glimpse of that most stolid and solid of vegetables.

There was a granite boulder near-by on which he dropped gratefully for a minute's rest. It was while reaching for a handkerchief to pat his moist forehead that he was reminded of the object he had picked up and still carried. He looked at it now, and found that it was a heavy stick which must have been thrust firmly into the center of the path in the woods; one end of it was split, and into the cleft had been thrust a bit of folded paper—brown paper, he noted, of cheap quality, but what really took his eye as he drew it free was his own name in typewritten letters on the outside.

Evidently this was intended for him, and he was about to open it to see what message it might contain when the sound of hurrying steps from the direction of the path diverted him from his purpose. Whatever the contents of the paper might be, they were for him alone. Prompted by an instinct for secrecy which was part of his psychological cosmos, he thrust the missive into the breast-pocket of his coat and turned—with a little tremor from his nerves—to see who was coming.

It was a woman who burst from the shelter of the trees—a woman in some haste and quite obviously in some alarm. She was panting from her exertions, for she ceased running only when she reached the

open, as Varr had done before her. A close-fitting felt hat was slightly askew on her head, and a once jaunty red feather that thrust up from it was now hanging limp and dejected, broken perhaps by some low-hanging branch she had failed to duck. She was dressed in a two-piece outing costume of knitted wool, and she looked just now as if those garments were too warm for comfort.

Her face brightened as she observed Varr seated on the rock, and she came toward him promptly. He brightened, too, welcoming any human being of tangible flesh and blood at that moment, although there was no living person whom he habitually detested more than he did his wife's sister, Miss October Copley. Her evident perturbation, however, gave him an uneasy premonition that he was about to hear more of his monk. But he left it to her to introduce the subject.

"Well, Ocky—reducing?"

"Not much!" answered the lady briefly. "Scared!"

She did not seat herself beside him on the boulder, but chose instead to drop at full length on a patch of green turf at his feet. With such breath as remained to her she expelled a sigh of relief.

"Scared, eh? I didn't suppose there was anything on earth that could scare you!"

She pounced instantly on his phraseology. "Perhaps not—on earth!" In a smaller voice than she was wont to employ, she added timidly, "Simon, d-do you believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts!" He fortified himself by a glance at the cabbages. "Talk sense, Ocky!"

"Who says it isn't sense?" snapped Miss Copley. "Anyway, I just got the shock of my long and ex-

citing life. See here, Simon—didn't you come up that path a few minutes ago?"

"I did. What of it?"

"I was sure it was you ahead of me as we crossed the meadow. Tell me, did you meet anything—I mean, any one?"

"What do you mean? Did *you*?"

"Y-yes. A figure in black—dressed something like a monk. I didn't meet him, exactly—he dodged into the woods as I came along. That is, I suppose he did—he just seemed to vanish!"

"Oh—he seemed to vanish, did he?" Varr shifted nervously on his granite throne. "You say he was dressed like a monk? Did—did you see his *face*?"

"No, I couldn't see that—"

"Ah! You couldn't, eh?" He rubbed the palms of his hands on his handkerchief as he probed a little deeper. "Too far away, I suppose."

"No. He had on a mask."

"A *mask*!" Comprehension came to him at once, and he inwardly cursed himself for an imaginative fool before continuing. "Well, Ocky, to tell you the truth, I did see him—right here at the head of the trail. He had his back to the light so I couldn't make out any mask. Er—what made you think of ghosts?"

"Because I had such a creepy feeling when I saw him. Didn't you?"

"Humph. For a moment, perhaps."

"Did you pass each other after you met?"

"Why—why— Confound it—*no*! He just *disappeared*!"

"Gosh!" said Miss Copley fervently. "Simon, it

was a spook! I know it was! Have you ever seen or heard of a monk around here before?"

"N-no. But that doesn't mean anything. There's no law that says they can't travel if they want to."

"But what would a monk be doing on a private path through this property? Why should he disappear from people? Why should he wear a mask? Monks don't wear masks." She reflected a moment. "Come to think of it, he wasn't dressed exactly like a monk—Simon! did you ever see a picture of those creatures of the Spanish Inquisition? 'Familiars' I think they used to call them. They dressed that way and wore masks!"

"Humph." Despite that skeptic snort, Varr was conscious of a nervous chill. "You've been drinking too much coffee, Ocky! Indigestion!"

"Oh!" cried Miss Copley suddenly. She raised herself on an elbow and looked all about her on the ground. "Oh—*pshaw!*"

"Eh? What is it?"

"Coffee! Your mentioning it just reminded me! I was coming back from a walk and I stopped at Wimpelheimer's to get a pound of it—I knew it was needed at the house. Now it's gone! I must have dropped it when that creature frightened me." She looked woebegone. "It's not very far back, but I'm so tired!"

"Are you?" repeated Varr restlessly.

"You'll get it for me, won't you, Simon?" She regarded him appealingly. "Oh—please!"

He got up from the rock and glanced at her with marked distaste. His gaze traveled to the dark entrance of the trail, came back to rest briefly on the consoling cabbages, went again to the trail. He took an irresolute, halting step—and then was struck by

an inspiration that cleared his brow as if by magic.

"What do I keep a houseful of idle servants for?" he demanded crisply. "Let Bates hunt it up—he'd better take a torch."

"Simon—you're *scared!*"

"Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, it's going to storm. I felt a drop of rain a moment ago. Come along to the house and stop your nonsense about monks and familiars and—and ghosts!"

Perhaps the last word came out a little uncertainly, but as he strode through the kitchen garden and around to the front door, followed closely by Miss Copley, he decided with pardonable pride that he had extricated himself from an embarrassing position with his accustomed masterful dexterity. The thought comforted him, for he vaguely realized that he had come close to experiencing a nervous panic during those minutes in the woods.

A white-haired man, still lithe, erect and agile despite his years, opened the door for them as their steps sounded on the planking of the veranda. This was Bates, the butler, a faithful retainer who had served the father of Lucy Varr and her sister a full decade before passing with the house and land into the keeping of the younger daughter and her husband. At the time of Mr. Copley's death, Varr had tentatively suggested letting the man go, but his wife had protested against that idea and had gained her point by shrewdly convincing her husband that good servants were becoming increasingly difficult to find and that Bates could never be replaced for less than twice his wages. It was one of the very rare occasions when Simon had credited the gentle, self-effacing lady with showing sound sense.

The butler had just lighted the big lamp in the

hall—electricity had not yet found its way into the old house—and the warm cheerfulness of the homely scene went far to rehabilitating Simon's convalescent nerve. Ghosts did not fit into this atmosphere. Bates did—Bates was almost as satisfying as a cabbage. Of course, Ocky would promptly do her best to spoil it—! He could have dispensed willingly with the examination to which she immediately subjected the servant.

"Bates, has any one called?"

"No, Miss Ocky."

"No one at all?"

"No, Miss Ocky." His wrinkled face showed his surprise at the repetition.

"How about the back door? Any one come there?"

"No one, Miss Ocky."

"Well, have you seen any one around the grounds? A man dressed like a monk? Wearing a mask?"

"A monk? In a mask?" The old man smiled indulgently at this quaint whimsy, which might have come more suitably from the little girl with flying pigtailed whom he used to chase out of his pantry than from this sensible, middle-aged woman who was waiting with apparent seriousness for his answer. "A monk in a mask? Good gracious, no, Miss Ocky!"

"All right." Miss Copley sent a significant glance at Varr, which he acknowledged by wrinkling his nose disdainfully. "By the way, Bates—I left a pound of coffee a little ways down the short-cut; you might step out and get it before dinner."

"Yes, Miss Ocky."

"You ought to find it right in the middle of the path."

"Yes, Miss Ocky."

Bates waited, and when nothing further appeared

to be forthcoming he betook himself wonderingly to his usual habitat in the rear quarter of the house. Monks in masks, indeed! And why did any one want to leave a pound of coffee down a trail with rain commencing to fall? He shook his head despondently over a Miss Ocky returned from foreign parts so changed from the Miss Ocky of the old days.

She seemed inclined to renew the ghostly topic of conversation when left alone with her brother-in-law, but Simon gave her no chance. He stalked off down the hall and entered his study, a small room that opened off the comfortable, old-fashioned parlor. He closed the door from the hall behind him, and also, for the sake of greater privacy, the door that communicated with the living-room. Then he seated himself at a roll-top desk and turned up the wick of the lamp that was burning dimly in a wall bracket, close at hand.

He had remembered, as he left Miss Ocky to her eerie fancies, the note which he had retrieved from the cleft stick. She had driven the recollection of it from his mind by her idle chatter about ghosts! He took the slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded it.

A few typewritten lines jumped to his eye, and he nodded as if that were as he had expected. Before reading the text, however, he leaned back in his chair and strove to recall the exact circumstances under which he had discovered the missive. He had been hurrying—no, blast it, he had been scuttling like a scared rabbit!—along the trail and had run into the stick, which had been jabbed into the ground where he could not fail to notice it—and at the very spot where the figure in black had been standing! Apparition—pooh! If there was one thing certain about

the whole silly business it was that the note had been put there by that—that creature. Simon did not profess to be versed in the lore of spooks, but he could not vision an ambassador from another world leaving behind him a tangible message composed on an earthly typewriter—! Pooh, and again, *pooh!*

He paused at this stage of his reflections to grin at the thought of Ocky, denied the knowledge of this consolatory bit of evidence. He hadn't mentioned it to her, and he wouldn't. Let her go on believing in ghosts! He was hugely pleased to think that there really existed one thing that could get under the skin of that hard-boiled human!

He was still smiling grimly as he finally began to read the message—but the smile had faded away before he finished.

*"Woe unto thee, stiff-necked son of Belial!
Woe unto thee, oppresor of the defensless!
Woe unto thee, who hast ground the faces of
the poor, who hast turned the hopes of thy
neighbors to ashes! Woe! Woe! Woe!
Take heed to thy ways and mend them, lest
thou be destroyed by the thunderbolts of
wrath!"*

A hand-written signature in a sprawling fist concluded the communication; heavy, labored characters, inscribed in a crimson fluid by a blunt pen, formed two words: "The Monk."

Simon Varr read the thing through twice. He laid it on the desk before him and stared at it as though it had some power to hypnotize him. A pulse of anger beat in his temple, but it was a more subdued anger than his quick temper usually pro-

duced. His mental processes had ceased to function normally as they sank beneath a wave of bewilderment such as had submerged them in the woods. Feebly, they came again to the surface.

This message was an event entirely outside the range of his previous experience. He had heard of anonymous letters, naturally, and he knew that the correct and courageous thing to do was to ignore them as if they did not exist. But anonymous letters, as he understood them, were brought by the postman and placed on the breakfast table with the morning mail; they weren't planted in the middle of a lonely copse by gentlemen attired as Spanish Inquisitioners!

The letter on his desk seemed to leer at its recipient and challenge him to ignore it.

What did it mean? Who had sent it? Was it a genuine warning and threat, or was it merely an elaborate hoax? He pondered the latter possibility quite at length—and thanked his stars that he had not told Ocky about it. Simon Varr was not the man to relish a jest against himself, and if Ocky ever heard about it and it subsequently proved to be the work of a practical joker—well, she would never let him forget that he hadn't gone after the pound of coffee!

But the theory that it might be a hoax grew more and more implausible as he contemplated it. He was positive he knew no one capable of such a prank, and to suppose that any stranger had gone to so much trouble to play a trick on him was absurd.

He had no lack of enemies—he knew that. Had one of them chosen this fantastic method of declaring war on him? In that case he could certainly afford to ignore the letter as coming from a source

unworthy of serious consideration. A worth-while enemy does not give a warning; he strikes. The cheapest thing about a rattlesnake is its rattle. Varr started to run over a list of recognized foemen who might have done this ill-natured deed, but presently desisted; their name was legion.

He did not overlook a third, quite reasonable theory. The whole business might have sprung from the unbalanced mind of a lunatic—some person who believed himself appointed to right the wrongs of the world—the victim of religious mania. That would account for the choice of a monastic costume in which to masquerade—and it would also account for the queer language of the letter, savoring as it did of the Bible. Again, the type of person most likely to suffer from that form of mental affliction would be a poorly educated person—and Simon entertained grave doubts as to the orthography of some of the words in the letter.

He reached into a pigeonhole of the desk and took out a small dictionary that he always kept at hand. He selected the dubious spellings that had caught his attention and ran them down one by one. "Oppresor" was wrong. "Defensless" was fearful. "Neighbor" started out brilliantly but came a cropper at the end. And that curious phrase, "Who hast"; what about that? Simon was a trifle hazy over this, so he gave the writer the benefit of the doubt. It sounded queer, though. Anyway, he had established to his satisfaction that the fellow was illiterate—naïvely passing by the fact that he had himself resorted to a dictionary to confirm his belief.

He congratulated himself frankly on one score—he had laid the ghost! He could admit now—though with a blush of shame—that he had been

badly shaken for just a few minutes, what with his own nerves and Ocky's confounded chattering! A man without a face! A "familiar" from the Spanish Inquisition! What rot a man's imagination can trick him into crediting. But that was over and done with now; he was back on solid ground, self-confident, secure—

He jumped quite half a foot in his chair at a muffled tap on the door—and swore at Bates for announcing dinner.

IV: The Legend of the Monk

FOUR people sat down to dinner that evening in the big dining-room across the hall from the parlor and Varr's study. The walls of the dining-room were plentifully equipped with sconces bearing lamps, but Simon, in some moment of petty economy, had once decreed that these should be lighted only on formal occasions. The only illumination this evening came from the candles on the table, which stood in the center of the room, and beyond the area reached by their rays the shadows deepened into impenetrability. At one end of the room a narrow slit of light at top and bottom marked the position of the swinging door which gave access to the pantry.

From this point to the sideboard, and thence to the table, and back again, moved Bates on noiseless feet as he busied himself with the service of the meal. In his black clothes, the instant he slipped out of the magic lighted circle he was swallowed completely by the shadows, to reappear presently with spectral abruptness in another segment of activity. Several times he startled Simon by silently materializing from the void at his elbow, and on each occasion the tanner found some excuse to vent his anger in a curt rebuke to the servant.

The four who dined were of diametrically opposed temperaments. Across the table from Varr sat his wife, Lucy, a pale, gentle soul who under happier circumstances might have retained more of her youthful freshness and beauty than she had. She

appeared washed-out and bloodless, so that her sister had remarked to herself that living with Simon Varr must be not unlike associating permanently with a vampire. His own abundant vitality sapped the life-juice from those about him, leaving the desiccated bodies an easy prey to his appetite for dominance.

At Varr's left was his son, Copley, a young man who had come of age that summer. He was tall and straight, aquiline of feature, brown-eyed and with dark chestnut hair that persisted, to his annoyance, in a tendency to curl. He was a likable chap, popular with young and old of both sexes. His good looks came from his mother, together with the equable disposition that promised to be his as he grew older and learned better to control his emotions. When a youngster he had been willful at times and prone to flashes of fiery temper, a heritage, beyond doubt, from his father's chronic irascibility, but the discipline of boarding-school and college had taught him to restrain at least its outward manifestations. From Simon, too, he had inherited a flair for business—an invaluable asset, thought Miss Ocky, for a man sentenced for life to this twentieth century America.

She was studying him now as she sat ~~across~~ the table from him, just as she studied the other two when opportunity served. They were all three practically strangers to her. The boy had not even been expected when she went to China with the Oriental Languages committee from her college, and in the twenty-three years that had elapsed before her return two months ago, time had worked changes. She would never have recognized her bright, joyous sister in this tired woman of the listless air. As for her

brother-in-law—well, perhaps it was not quite accurate to say that he was a stranger to her; she had known Simon Varr at the period of his courtship and marriage and he was still Simon Varr, only a little more so! Detestable creature. She held him accountable, quite justly, for the blight that lay upon Lucy.

And upon Bates, too, for that matter. Miss Ocky had always had a warm place in her heart for the faithful old man, reposing in him the trust and confidence that her father had shown in the same quarter. Bates was something more than the ordinary servant; he came close to being a throw-back to the feudal retainer type of other days in his loyalty and devotion to his house, just as his former master, Sylvester Copley, had approximated in his time the character of a country gentleman. Bates was getting on in years, of course, which would account for much of his increased graveness and passivity, but not all. Unless Miss Ocky's suspicions were wide of the mark, he, too, had come under the deadening influence of Varr's dominance—ah! but *had* he *entirely*? At the very moment she was thinking about it, Simon had uttered a terse comment, as biting as acid, upon some negligible feature of the dinner-service. No faintest flicker of his facial muscles gave any hint that Bates had heard the remark, but his eyes revealed that he had, and for the fraction of a second they glinted oddly red in the candlelight. Was there a spark of manhood in his breast that still glowed when breathed upon?

They dined in silence for the most part. Simon was never a brilliant conversationalist, and to-night his thoughts were busy with matters far afield. Young Copley was taciturn and moody, preoccupied

by reflections of no very agreeable nature, to judge by his glum manner. Lucy Varr, helping herself but scantily from the dishes passed, preserved her customary pose of nervous diffidence. Only Miss Ocky tried to dispel the settled atmosphere of depression by occasionally shooting point-blank questions at one or another of her companions—and toward the end of the meal she did manage to stir up a little excitement.

"Copley," she addressed the quiet young man across the table. "You've been out in the great world for several days; what's going on in New York? Haven't you brought back any news to us country folk?"

"New York?" He roused himself by a palpable effort. "No, Aunt Ocky, I didn't pick up anything in New York that would interest you. Nothing much good at the theaters just now. But if you want a piece of local news I may have one for you. It would be more interesting to you three than to me. When I got off the train this afternoon there was another chap who swung off just ahead of me, and I noticed him particularly because he was so different from anything you'd expect to drop off the four-sixteen. Tall and well-set-up, dressed like the mirror of fashion, smooth and polished—and followed by a valet, if you please, carrying his grips and a bag of golf clubs! Imagine a sight like that in Hambleton! I thought he'd made a mistake in his station, until I saw him walk right across the platform to where Adams, the baggage-master, was standing. He said something and held out his hand, and old Adams grabbed it and shook it as if he was greeting a prodigal son. I thought the valet looked a bit shocked! Then this chap tucked himself and

his man and his baggage into one of Brown's jitneys and drove off like a lord!"

"Who in the world could it have been?" wondered his mother, awakened to a mild interest at the account of such grandeur in Hambleton. "Did you ask, Copley?"

"I have my share of vulgar curiosity, mother; I did. As soon as he disappeared I pounced on old Adams and asked him the name of his swell friend. He told me that it was Leslie Sherwood, the son of the man who died last winter—*hullo!*"

He broke off short and looked into the darkness behind him, whence had come the crash of china as Bates dropped a tray of coffee cups. Silence succeeded the tragedy, during which they could hear the butler's muttered ejaculations of horror and distress as he bent to retrieve the débris.

"Confound you, Bates! You get clumsier every day you live!"

Varr's outburst was swift, but not swift enough to deceive his sister-in-law. Her quick eye had detected several little items of interest, although they had occurred simultaneously and in opposite directions.

At the mention of Leslie Sherwood's name, Lucy Varr had straightened in her chair and turned to her son with parted lips as if eager for more news, while a delicate flush—the first touch of color Ocky had seen there in two months—sprang into her pale cheeks. This was fair enough. In the old days, Leslie Sherwood had been attentive to Lucy Copley in such degree that their circle confidently stood by for a formal announcement. Then he had rather abruptly departed toward a "business career in New York," making it plain that Hambleton would see

him no more for some while to come. His departure left clear the way to the lady's hand for a colder, less attractive, but more determined suitor. Lucy married Simon Varr.

She was entitled, then, to display some faint emotion at the mention of a recreant knight, and Simon, with propriety, might have shown a husbandly twinge of jealousy or contempt or dislike—any of a dozen different sentiments other than the one he did reveal. At the bit of news so casually dropped by his son, his head had jerked up sharply and a look of fear had flashed into his eyes and out again. He had cleverly seized upon the butler's mishap to cover his confusion, but the ruse was too late to be effective as far as Miss Ocky was concerned.

So Simon was afraid of Leslie Sherwood, or else he had something to fear from the sudden reappearance of that gentleman. Which was it? and why? Miss Ocky determined to find out eventually. In the meantime she would accept the curious circumstance and store it in that corner of her brain where she was collecting odds and ends of data relating to her brother-in-law.

"When did old Mr. Sherwood die?" she asked promptly.

"Last February," answered her sister. "He had been very ill for several months—a general breakdown."

"Leslie was here at the time, I suppose."

"N-no; he wasn't. You're not posted on local topics, Ocky! This is the first time Leslie has been back in Hambleton since he left to go into business in New York. No one ever knew anything definite, but we have always assumed that father and son quarreled over something so bitterly that reconcile-

ment was impossible. Still, when the old man died he left everything to Leslie—and he has turned up, now. I wonder if he will sell the place or—or live here?”

That was an unusually long speech for Lucy Varr, and it betrayed her lively interest in the subject under discussion. Simon must have noted that and perhaps resented it, for his face darkened. He made no comment, however, but celebrated the end of dinner in his usual manner by pushing back his chair a little, crossing his legs comfortably, and beginning a series of excavating operations with a quill toothpick which he drew from his vest pocket. Miss Ocky winced. This was the postprandial habit of his that annoyed her excessively.

She had not changed for dinner. Now she took a cigarette case from a side pocket of her coat, extracted a cigarette and lighted it from one of the candles. Simon did not smoke himself, and he disliked intensely the sight of a woman using tobacco. He glanced at Ocky, and to her deep satisfaction made a wry face at the cloud of smoke she contentedly exhaled. Wincing was easy.

The little circle broke up after dinner. Varr went off to his study and shut himself in, his wife pleaded a headache, and with a word of apology to her sister departed for her bedroom. Ocky, amiably anxious to distract her nephew's thoughts from whatever he was glooming over, suggested a game of chess. Finding this had not been included in his college curriculum, she announced that she would settle herself in the living-room with some new books that had come.

She went upstairs for one of these, and returned bearing it and a small sheathed dagger with a highly ornamented handle. She found Copley in the living-

room, attired in a raincoat, standing and looking at the closed door leading to Simon's study. Miss Ocky settled herself in a chair by the lamp on the center table, drew the dagger from its worn leather sheath and proceeded to cut the pages of Henner's "Through Asia." She glanced up whimsically at her nephew.

"Well, Copley, are you posing for a statue of indecision?"

"Something like that, Aunt Ocky." He smiled ruefully. "I was going for a tramp, then I thought I'd drop in for a chat with father—and now I think I won't have a chat with him, but will go for a walk."

"It's pouring, isn't it?"

"I don't care."

"Of course, you don't. I know that mood—and a good sloshing hike in the rain is a splendid cure for it. I know what's the matter with you, too." She shot a look at the closed door and lowered her voice. "Why don't you cut the Gordian knot and be done with it?" she added quietly.

"I—I don't get you."

"Elope, idiot child! You and she are both of age. Consider the late Mr. Ajax of Greece—he defied the lightning and got away with it! They can't do more than excommunicate you with bell and book and candle."

"But that's plenty, Aunt Ocky." A smile that had greeted her suggestion faded away, leaving him gloomier than ever. "If I only had to think about myself—! But I can't let Sheila in for a lot of hardship. It costs money, these days, to live in even the most moderate comfort, and all I could bring into the family treasury would be just what I could earn with my two hands—supposing I was lucky enough

to find a job! It wouldn't be fair to Sheila—that's the long and short of it."

"Have you given her a chance to speak for herself?" His aunt sniffed contemptuously. "Gracious goodness, Copley, isn't there something more in life than money? Don't people think of anything else in America?"

"Oh, yes. It's a free country and a man has a perfect right to be a visionary and starve to death if he wants to. It just happens I don't!" He grinned as some of her disgust went into a savage slashing of uncut edges. "As things are, I don't believe I'll ask Sheila to share my crust of bread."

"Then I'll ask her for you—blessed if I don't! I intended to run over and see her in the morning, anyway. Did it ever strike you that matchmaking is the proper business of old maids? They atone for celibacy through vicarious marriage!"

"So that is the explanation of their favorite indoor sport, is it? But I can't regard you as a confirmed old maid, Aunt Ocky." He moved to her side and dropped a hand affectionately on her shoulder. "If you won't think me awfully fresh for saying it—you're about the youngest looking woman for your age that I've ever laid eyes on."

"Oh, thank you, Copley; thank you very much. Really, I must remember you in my will for them kind words! But about to-morrow—may I represent myself as being your plenipotentiary?"

"Sure thing. Go as far as you like, Aunt Ocky. Anything you start, I'll finish." The sound of a chair being pushed back in the study caught his ear and indicated a discreet change of subject. He stooped to retrieve the dagger that had slipped from her lap and examined it a moment. For all its ex-

quisite beauty of design and workmanship, it was a wicked little weapon. "You have a bloodthirsty taste in paper cutters, Aunt Ocky. Where did you get this? Has it a history?"

"Very likely, but I don't know it. It is certainly old enough to have a lurid past. I picked it up in the bazaar at Teheran. That inscription on the blade is Persian."

"What does it mean? They taught me Persian when they taught me chess."

"It reads, 'I bring Peace!'"

"Oh. The Oriental point of view, I suppose! We would be more apt to think of a dagger as bringing war."

"We think backwards at times," commented Miss Ocky. She reclaimed her colorful souvenir of the East, then glanced up as the study door opened. "Hello, Simon. I expect you will sleep easier to-night; no fear of fire bugs in a rain like this!"

He grunted something unintelligible, and stared at Copley standing there in the parlor in his raincoat. The young man returned the stare with expressionless face. Neither he nor his father spoke, and in a moment the tanner left the room.

Miss Ocky was as good as her word the following morning. She marched cross-country to the Graham house, some half-mile distant, and had a long and enlightening conversation with Sheila. She had met the girl several times and approved of her highly, and when she left her finally to return home her good opinion of Miss Graham was in nowise diminished. The young woman, if she were not mistaken, had just the qualities needed to make a useful citizen out of a husband like Copley whose

chief defect was clearly a lack of decision. He wanted starching, that was it.

She bore homeward a book that she had borrowed from Sheila, and though it only wanted twenty minutes to lunch time, she neither went to her room to freshen up nor sought her nephew to make a hasty report on the result of her embassy. She betook herself instead to the study, and there was a malicious twinkle in her eye as she tapped on the closed door. She obeyed a gruff command to enter.

Varr had made the best of his period of enforced idleness by working on a batch of order-books that he had brought from his office. He was busy with them now, and he looked as displeased as he was surprised by Ocky's interruption.

"What do *you* want?" he snapped irritably.

"I've picked up some information that I thought you'd like to hear, Simon. How is your nerve this morning? I've just been to call on Sheila Graham and she fairly made my blood curdle."

"Serves you right. Mine curdles when I even think of her." He frowned. "Why did you go to see her?"

"I promised to take her a recipe for a cous-cous I described to her the other day. Anyway, I like her, even if you don't. But that has nothing to do with our muttons! While I was chatting with her I happened to mention our experience yesterday with the monk—"

"You did! What in the world *for*?"

"Well, Simon, when I go to call on any one I like to talk about *something*—I can't sit like a dummy—"

"You can't!"

"And that was certainly the most interesting bit of

news that I had. It quite woke her up. She's something of a blue-stocking, you know, and has read a lot about the early history of this country. When I spoke of the monk she looked very queer and went straight to a shelf of books and took out this one—"Miss Ocky held up the one she was carrying, and Varr saw that she was keeping a place in it with one forefinger. "When she showed me a certain passage in it, I put it right under my arm and brought it—"

"You needn't have," he told her abruptly. "I recognize the thing, though I've never bothered to read it; Jennison's 'History of Wayne County,' isn't it? There's a copy among your father's books in the library."

"Is there? I wish I'd known it!" She opened the book at her place, steadied the heavy volume on her knees and cleared her throat. "I am going to read this to you, Simon—it isn't long."

"Go ahead." He had tried overnight to put the disagreeable subject out of his mind but had not succeeded very well. He was consumed by curiosity now to learn what she had discovered, though nothing would have induced him to admit it. "What's it all about?"

She began to read in a soft, well-modulated voice.

"Wayne County is not without its share of legends and quaint scraps of folklore, some of them nicely calculated to chill the blood o' nights. One fable, at least, has risen from a base of fact; I refer to the famous Monk of Hambleton. Ancient chronicles of this town record the arrival—in pre-Revolutionary times—of an unfortunate individual whose face had been shockingly mutilated by accident or disease. He drifted to Hambleton from the outer,

world and apparently quartered himself on the countryside, living the life of a hermit in a small dry cave that still shows traces of his presence. He habitually wore the garb of a friar—a penance, perhaps, for former sins—and his disfigured face was always concealed from curious eyes by a mask of black cloth.

“After his death—a lonely demise in his humble cave—a story sprang up about him to the effect that his spirit still lingered in the neighborhood of its passing. Several credible persons claimed at different times to have met the Monk, and since by some unhappy chance these victims of an optical delusion were all subsequently visited by misfortune in greater or less degree, it soon began to be whispered about that to encounter the specter was a sure augury of impending calamity. A local poet, long since forgotten, was inevitably inspired to preserve the legend in his rustic doggerel. I append a few couplets:

*“Who meets the monk at crack o’ dawn
Shall rue the day that he was born.*

*“Who meets the monk in light of day,
Woe goes with him on his way.”*

“Cheery little thing,” grunted Simon Varr as she paused an instant. “Is that all of it?”

“No, there’s one more verse.” Miss Ocky deepened her tones a note or two as she solemnly read it.

*“Who meets the monk when dusk is nigh
Within the fortnight he shall die.”*

She closed the book and regarded her brother-in-law with eyes half-mocking, half-pitying.

"Of course you wouldn't dream of treating such nonsense seriously, Simon; I know that. But it's curious, and rather interesting, don't you think? Jennison had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote his account of it, but even he relates as a matter of fact the coincidence that those persons who saw the vision were subsequently badly out of luck." Ocky shook her head gently and glanced at him commiseratingly. "If it *should* come true in your case, Simon, I suppose this is an opportune moment to offer you my condolences!"

"Thank you," he managed to reply dryly.

He felt very squeamish inside, though most of that was due to his innate abhorrence of anything that brought up the subject of death. As far as the Monk was concerned, he had found in the letter thrust into the cleft stick and now reposing in a pigeonhole of his desk the reason back of that masquerade—though he had to admit that the writer of the anonymous note had certainly hit upon a sufficiently gruesome method of transmitting it.

"Thank you, Ocky, for your condolences," he continued after an interval. "The same to you and many of them! We'll go together, no doubt. Don't forget you saw the Monk at the same time I did!"

"Ah!"

The monosyllable was almost a gasp of pain. Simon stared at her, rather startled by the effectiveness of his sardonic reminder. The book she was holding had dropped to the floor with a crash, her cheeks had gone white to the lips, and now she was staring straight ahead of her with a fixed expression of horror in her eyes as though they were truly visioning the sure approach of Death.

V: Miss Lucy's Man

IT did not take Simon Varr and Miss Copley very long to recover from the perturbation they had shown when she finished reading him the bit of folklore relating to the Monk. Both of them were highly efficient in the art of self-repression, or failing that, knew how to mask an inner emotion behind their normal outward semblance. When they presently left the study for the luncheon table, Simon wore his usual frown above knitted brows, while Miss Ocky displayed her accustomed placidity of countenance with its high-lights of humor about her lips and sharp gray eyes.

A dish of French chops annoyed the lord and master of the house. He pointed out to his patient helpmeet that times were ripe for economy and that French chops are economical only in respect to their nutritive content. With the tannery closed down, an era of corned beef and cabbage was strongly indicated—especially, she would understand, as there now appeared to be four mouths to feed in the family instead of the customary three. He hoped she would heed his words and exercise greater prudence in the management of her household—and the courteous inflection of his tones as he voiced his hope was a masterpiece of sarcasm. It left his wife pale and resigned, his son red and embarrassed.

"If corned beef and cabbage ever shows up in this dining-room," remarked the one member of his audience still undaunted, "my father will turn in his grave."

"Your father thought entirely too much of his stomach," said her host coldly.

"Yes? Well, it repaid him for all the affection he lavished on it. His digestion was wonderful to the very end. How is yours?"

"I could say that that is purely my own business, but if you insist on knowing, my digestion is excellent."

"I shouldn't have thought it. I don't agree with you as to the essential privacy of the subject, either. It concerns all of us since we have to live with you."

"Do you?"

"Ah!" A touch of color in her cheeks suggested that flint was at last beginning to spark beneath the steel. "Apropos of that and your earlier remark, Simon—would it ease your financial straits at all if I were to contribute something for my board and lodging? It would be a novel experience for me in this house, but I've always been able to adapt myself to altered circumstances."

She did not expect a hurried and polite disclaimer from her brother-in-law. Disclaimers of any sort were not in Simon's line. He merely sent her a chill look as he thrust back from the table and rose to his feet.

"That is something you can settle with Lucy," he said coldly. "I'm sorry I can't stay and chat with you a little longer, but I am due to spend the afternoon at the tannery."

"It's nice to know that you can spend something," she threw after him sweetly. "Why don't you bring back a hide or two from the vats, Simon? We might boil them down for soup!"

He glared back at her over his shoulder as he stalked from the room. Miss Ocky glanced at the

faces of the two who remained with her and gave a contented little chuckle.

"Now, that scene was a bit of honest, downright vulgarity!" she said cheerfully. "Refreshing once in a while, don't you think?"

"Ocky! I wish you wouldn't poke him up like that."

"Well! Suppose he stops poking me first! I haven't got the patience of a saint like you, Lucy—and gracious only knows where *you* get it from, my poor child! Twenty years ago you'd have taken that plate of chops and shoved it down his throat." A fleeting recollection corollary to this thought impelled her to shoot a discontented glance at her nephew across the table. "What in the world has become of the Copley spirit?" she demanded bitterly.

"You don't really understand Simon," murmured her sister.

"No," said Miss Ocky grimly, "but I'm beginning to."

They left it at that and withdrew from the dining-room. From his inconspicuous post near the side-board, Bates followed the retreating figure of Miss Ocky with admiring and grateful eyes. Here, he told himself, was the old Miss Ocky coming to life again, and his heart rejoiced to think that Simon was in a fair way to get back as good as he gave. The spirit of the Copleys—aye, they had it, every one of them, if only they would show it now and then!

Lucy Varr departed for the kitchen, possibly to caution the cook against undue ostentation at dinner, and Copley, obeying an imperious glance from a pair of gray eyes, followed his aunt to the veranda. She led the way to one end of it, and there turned the corner into an ell that had been screened and glassed

against the mosquitoes of summer and the frosts of winter. With comfortable wicker chairs and quantities of soft cushions, it was a cosy nook that had become Miss Ocky's favorite haunt for reading or writing.

She ousted a magnificent, smoky-blue Angora who, catlike, had decided the best was none too good for him, seated herself and waved Copley to another chair.

"I had a talk with Sheila this morning," she announced.

The young man's face had been flushed and dark, but now, at the mention of Sheila's name, it lighted quickly. He had been acutely embarrassed during the exchange of courtesies between his father and his aunt, and he had felt a quick resentment at the innuendo she had flung at him and which he had by no means missed, but these passing moods vanished in favor of happier emotions.

"I wondered if you really would! But, say, Aunt Ocky—you surely didn't have the nerve to mention your elopement scheme, did you?"

"I certainly did. My nerve is a very superior article. I wish to goodness I could graft a piece of it onto your backbone."

"Oh. Can't a fellow be sensible, Aunt Ocky, without being accused of spinelessness? However, for the love of Mike, tell me what she said! She turned it down hard, of course."

"She did not, though it was obvious that she would have preferred to hear it from your own lips. Naturally. At any rate, when I first got there I broached the subject tactfully—"

"You couldn't do it any other way, Aunt Ocky."

"Don't be impertinent. She soon made it plain

that she was willing to talk frankly and openly—was glad of the rare opportunity to discuss matters with a person of some intelligence. She has been having a little unpleasantness of her own; did you know that? It appears her father has been fearfully stirred up over something yesterday and to-day, and this morning when she spoke of you in some connection he was quite savage. He was never keen on the idea of a match between you two, was he?"

"No. I'm afraid he has sense, too!"

"Well, his daughter has a mind of her own, and she has made it up. She has wisely concluded that a lot of our happiness in this life has to be snatched from the Fates who dangle it before our eyes, just out of our reach. She feels that the most practical way for you and her to grab yours is to marry first and let the fireworks follow. Opposition to the marriage will be curiously ineffective if the marriage has already taken place. I thought she showed a good deal of fine logic, there."

"You mean, she agreed with everything you suggested!" Copley made a despairing gesture. "Aunt Ocky, come down to brass tacks. It's true that I'm crazy about Sheila and that she cares more for me than I could hope to deserve—"

"Ever so much more!"

"—but Sheila is a human being who has to eat! She has to have clothes to wear. She probably has a preference for a roof over her head. And I—I'm bust!"

"Nothing saved from your allowance, I suppose?"

"It was never magnificent. Now, it is discontinued. Father has always put it to my credit at the bank punctually on the first of the month. Last Tuesday I dropped in to get my balance and—found

an overdraft! He was never careless in his life, so I don't need to ask him if he forgot to make the deposit. He has simply decided to bring it sharply to my attention that I am in no situation to marry, so he has cut out my allowance."

"Humph. I expect you're right." She frowned at this new manifestation of Simon's ruthless determination always to have his own way in everything, then shifted a portion of her severity toward her nephew. "In a sense, Copley, I'm rather glad that he did. If there's one thing you need, it's a touch of adversity. Stiffen up, boy! I've done everything this morning that I propose to do for you; now go to Sheila and talk things over with her, as you ought to, instead of with me. She's waiting for you!"

He rose with decision, a new alertness in his face and manner.

"Aunt Ocky, you're a brick." Impulsively, he took a step toward her, thrust forth a sinewy hand and gripped the one she raised. "It makes me feel like a new man just to listen to you—and the only thing I can't understand is why you think me worth the trouble you take."

"There is no mystery about that. I have always loved your mother tenderly, and some of that affection you have inherited. Sheila is a lovely girl who I believe will make you happy—and do you good. As for my desire to have the business settled—well, I've my own reasons for that which will be made clear to you in time. Have you anything else on your infant mind? No? Then, go—for goodness' sake, go!"

He went.

Miss Ocky sank back in her chair and for a space stared out at the peaceful countryside that rose and

fell in gentle undulations which finally faded away into the blue distance. The forgiving Angora leaped to her lap and she caressed him absently, her mind centered upon her thoughts, which were not always as cheerful as they might have been.

So rapt was she in meditation that she was not aware of Bates' presence until he had stood near her for a full minute. His house-shoes enabled him to move on noiseless feet and he had never stooped to that common subterfuge of butlers, the nervous cough. He stood patiently, in silence, and Miss Ocky, when she noticed him at length, was stirred to remembrance by something in his attitude. It was just so he had used to come upon her in the old days when he was wont to bring his difficulties to her, apparently deriving comfort from her half-mocking, half-sympathetic comments.

"Well, Bates—you want to speak to me?"

"Yes, Miss Ocky, I do—and I don't."

"I understand perfectly, thanks to my exceptional cleverness and my vast knowledge of human nature. What you want to do is blow off steam—as you used to—but you are not certain that it's quite the right thing to do. Isn't that it?"

"Yes, Miss Ocky."

"Well, I can set your doubts at rest. It isn't right; and now that we've settled that," added the lady comfortably, "go ahead and blow. After a long and very virtuous life I'm beginning to think there is much to be said for crime! I can guess your secret sorrow, too."

"I'm sure you can, Miss Ocky." A faint amusement that had lighted his tired eyes at her philosophy vanished again. "You've been here two months or more, and you've seen how it is for yourself."

"Yes—I have. I tell you candidly, Bates, if I had dreamed how things were going here I would never have stayed away twenty years. I was shocked when I saw my sister—"

"That's it, Miss Ocky, that's it!" In his eagerness he was oblivious to his breach of good form in interrupting. "It's not myself I'm blowing off steam about. It's Miss Lucy. You can guess how I've felt through these years, watching her change into what she is. It has hurt me, Miss Ocky, for when all is said and done, I'm Miss Lucy's man as I was her father's before her—not Simon Varr's! You remember what she was like before you went away—always bright and happy and full of fun and singing around the house. We used to call her the Queen of Fairyland—"

"My memory is excellent, Bates. You needn't harrow me further."

"And look at her now," continued the old man relentlessly. "A poor meek woman that never dares to call her soul her own, faded and lifeless as the flowers I throw out of the vases, looking twice her age—"

"I hope she's well out of earshot, Bates."

"And it's all the fault of that man!" said the butler passionately, his eyes shining with anger and indignation and his usual careful diction sacrificed to the greater need of plain speech. "It's him that has done it with his sneerin' mockin' ways that would bring an angel to tears—his penny-savin', snivelin' meanness that grudges her every cent she spends, just as though he'd had a dollar to call his own before she lifted him out of the gutter where he belongs. 'Twould have been kinder if he had up in the beginning and struck her over the head and been

done with it instead of wearin' her down to skin and bones by his naggin' and growlin' and snarlin'. And how do you think I've felt, Miss Ocky, while I stood by all these years and watched it goin' on unable to lift a finger to her help? 'Tis only once and again, when he has her near to tears at the table, that I'm able to drop a plate or joggle his elbow and him drinkin' coffee the while, and so distract his attention."

He paused for breath. Ordinarily Miss Ocky would have been vastly entertained by this sketch of Simon's attention being distracted, but she was in no mood for amusement at the moment. Her eyes were hard, and if she deliberately kept her comments pitched on a semi-humorous note, it was more to pacify and soothe the old butler than anything else.

"I gather you don't care for Mr. Varr," she said.

"Does any one, Miss Ocky?" he retorted more calmly.

"You used a curious expression a moment since," she said, ignoring a question she deemed purely rhetorical. "You spoke of yourself as 'Miss Lucy's man.' Just what did you mean, Bates? I know you don't use words just because you like the sound of them."

"You don't miss anything, do you, Miss Ocky?" His set face softened as he regarded her with a look almost of affection. "No, you were never one to miss anything! I'll tell you what I meant, though I've never breathed a word of it even to Miss Lucy, bless her!"

"There are a lot of things you could tell me," said Miss Ocky, "and I hope some day you will. Go ahead with this one, first."

"It dates back. I could make a long story of it,

but I won't. You might say it goes back to the time I took service with your father and mother. I was in trouble, mortal trouble, when they took me in, Miss Ocky, and they gave me a home and comfort and—and security. That last is a great thing in a hard world, as I guess you know. The only way I could repay them was by being a 'good and faithful servant,' as the Bible puts it, and I had reason to believe that they both came to be glad of the day they showed kindness to a less fortunate human."

"What was your trouble?" she asked quietly, for this was her first intimation that his advent to the household had been marked by anything out of the ordinary. "My father never mentioned it."

"He wouldn't—and it doesn't belong with what I've started to tell you now, Miss Ocky." He glanced at her apologetically. "I'm telling you how I know they were glad to have me. When your mother was dying, Miss Ocky, she had me called in for a word with her. She thanked me for the service I'd given and said she hoped I would always stay with your father as long as he needed me—'which will be to the day of his death,' she said."

"The same thing happened when his time came. I was in and out of his room a dozen times a day while he was ill, and once he stopped me and told me a few things he had on his mind."

"'It's a queer thing, Bates,' he said. 'Here I am dying with scarce a relative to my name, and I'm leaving two daughters to face the world alone. They'll have money, but they won't have an older person to help them over the rough places.' I could see he was worried. 'Of course,' he said, 'Miss Lucy is going to marry that young fellow, Varr. I'm not so fond of him as she is, though I've nothing against

him that would stop the match. It's her I'm thinking about. She will have this house when I'm gone and she is married—and I want her to have you.' Well, Miss Ocky, to tell you the truth I started to say something about hoping that *you* would set up housekeeping and find a place for me, but he wouldn't listen to me for a minute. You know how quick he was. 'I'm competent to judge my own children!' he snapped at me. 'Ocky can stand on her own two legs as long as she has 'em and will get along nicely on crutches after that. It's Lucy that may need help.' He looked at me very sharp—you have his eyes, Miss Ocky. 'I'm a dying man and this is the last thing I'll ever ask of you,' he said. 'I don't pretend that you owe me anything, but I'll ask you as a favor to promise me you'll always stand by Miss Lucy.'

"There couldn't be two answers to that. I promised."

"And you've kept your promise faithfully. You've stood by."

"That's all I have done, though," grumbled the old servant morosely. His troubled gaze sought hers. "I've just—stood by."

"Well, you couldn't very well do more. I think it is greatly to your credit that you didn't leave the house long ago."

"I've been tempted often enough, Miss Ocky, but there's been the thought in the back of my head that some day I might really be able to help Miss Lucy in an hour of need." His hands closed nervously. "But for that I'd have left, no fear! I've stood so much from him that now I *hate* him! Do you know, Miss Ocky," his voice dropped to awed confession, "when he was so sick of pneumonia awhile

back I just hoped and hoped and *hoped* our troubles were near an end!"

"It would have been more practical to have left a window open on him, but I suppose the nurse would have stopped that." Miss Ocky's voice was an amused drawl. "Did you try prayer, Bates?"

"*Prayer!* Good gracious, no, Miss Ocky!"

"It's effective sometimes." She seemed to muse. "Of course, if you were only practiced in witchcraft you could make a wax image of him and then stick pins in it until he curled up and died—"

"Good gracious, Miss Ocky, but you've brought back some terrible ideas from those foreign parts!" He was smiling, now, to show that he had caught her mood and understood she was poking fun at him. The ceremony of the blowing off of steam was nearly concluded. "If you ask me, I don't believe that even witchcraft could hurt Simon Varr. It was only the other day I heard him tell Miss Lucy that he'd increased his life insurance and that the doctor had told him he was good for a century-mark."

"Humph!" There was about her the air of one whose hopes have just been rudely dashed. Then her face brightened and she added with determined cheerfulness. "Never mind, Bates—you'd be amazed if you knew how often doctors are wrong!"

"I hope you're right, Miss Ocky!"

"Suppose we drop the subject for the time. If you will look in the sitting-room you'll find a book on the table called 'The Court of the Borgias.' Bring it to me, please. I think a little quiet reading will settle my thoughts after our conversation."

He went off smiling to get the volume, and presently returned with it. He lingered to produce a

match for the cigarette she took from a stand beside her.

"Thank you for listening to me, Miss Ocky."

"And thank you, Bates, for telling me what you did about father. I am glad he had confidence in my ability to take care of myself, and that he wasn't worrying over me when he had so much else to think about."

"I wish Simon Varr was more like him!" said Bates.

She made no reply to that, and he withdrew in his noiseless fashion. She did not immediately dip into the sedative history of the Borgias, but remained looking at the corner around which he had vanished with something akin to speculative interest. She was pondering the old man's revelation of his hatred for Varr and the curious glint she had caught in his eye at dinner the night before. It would be amusing, she thought, if Bates instead of handing Simon the carving-knife should sometime so far forget himself as to slip it between his master's shoulders.

Amusing was the word she used to herself; perhaps, as the butler had suggested, she had brought home some terrible ideas from the East—ideas about Kismet and fatalism and the cheapness of human life in comparison to human good. Wrong ideas, from the point of view of the queer, drab, cramped and hypocritical Occidental mind.

She contemplated the Occidental mind briefly, then dismissed it as a negligible quantity and settled to her book.

VI: An Aunt in Need

IT was very nearly dinner-time before Copley Varr came back from his talk with Sheila Graham. In deference to a hint from her that the course of true love could not run smooth that afternoon in the vicinity of her father, they had taken a long walk over the hills along quiet country roads where hands could touch unseen by alien eyes. They were happy, but rather nervously so, with something of the nervousness of a young colt about to kick over the traces for the first time and who is a little uncertain about the consequences.

One bit of their afternoon was devoted to a ramble around the grounds of a small, vacant house, whose exterior they viewed and discussed from every possible angle. It stood in the center of a wooded ten-acre tract, a long mile by winding road from Simon Varr's house but not a quarter of that distance from it as a plane flies. It was situated, in fact, at the bottom of the very hill on which Simon's home flaunted its greater magnificence, and it had once formed part of the property until severed from it by the elder Copley's will.

They tried the front and back door, but finding them quite naturally locked they made no further effort to effect an entrance. They contented themselves with strolling around it once again, admiring its shingles that were weather-beaten to a silvery gray, enthusing over the quaintly-gabled windows of its upper story, calling each other's attention to its palpable solidity of structure.

"A few hundred dollars spent on these grounds!" cried Sheila, her cheeks flushed, her blue eyes shining. "Coppie, isn't it a *love* of a place? Did you ever in your life see a nicer?"

Coppie admitted freely that he never had.

It was for reasons directly connected with this desirable country property that he sought audience of his aunt immediately upon his return home. She was not to be found anywhere downstairs, and since his impatience did not welcome the idea of waiting for a fortuitous opportunity to chat with her in private, he took the stairs three at a time and rapped eagerly on the door of her bedroom.

This was presently opened to him by a tall, bony, angular woman of fifty-odd who regarded him not altogether favorably through steel-rimmed spectacles. This was Janet Mackay, whom the prosaic-minded would have designated a lady's-maid, but who had risen from that humble position to be no less than Chancellor of State to her sovereign majesty, Miss Ocky. The two women had shared the ups-and-downs, the sunshine and shadow, of that mystic, colorful Orient through whose extent the restless curiosity of the younger had led them to and fro. Out there the line between mistress and servant had inevitably been supplanted by the bond of companionship; but when they returned to the more humdrum civilization of the western world, it was Janet whose dour Scotch rectitude had re-established the distinction. She took her meals with old Bates at a little table in the butlery, found her chief relaxation in the one motion-picture house that Hambleton boasted, and for the rest, "kept herself to herself."

"Hello, Janet!" he greeted her. "Is my aunt in

there? Ask her if I can come in and speak to her."

The woman drew aside in the doorway as Miss Ocky answered for herself.

"That you, Copley? Come in. I'm out on the veranda. Janet, you needn't wait."

Miss Ocky's bedroom, like all the others on the upper floor, had a small private balcony outside its tall French windows that made a pleasant place to draw a comfortable chair in the late afternoon or the cool of the evening. She was sitting there now and called to him to bring a chair for himself, but he preferred to lounge against the heavy wooden rail of the balcony.

"Well, Romeo! I expect affairs have been marching with you and Juliet or you wouldn't be hunting me up so promptly."

"See here, Aunt Ocky, I'm just tickled pink and all that, but are you sure you ought to have done it?"

"Suggested the elopement?"

"N-no, of course not. That's all right. That's lovely. We are going to take your advice and grab our happiness. What I'm fussing about is the house business."

"Yes, you'd find something to fuss about, wouldn't you! I didn't encounter any such obstinacy in Sheila, but women are much more practical than men in every respect. When I told her I owned that particular property and proposed to settle it on you jointly as a wedding-gift, she yelped with joy. It's true that after that she began to make polite gestures of remonstrance, but the yelp came first by a good, wide margin! I'm glad one of you has some common-sense."

"I'm just as grateful as I can be, but—"

"Really, Copley, you're a downright nuisance."

Let me tell you something, my child. I've a great deal more money than your mother or you or any one else around here has any idea of. I've made investments in my time that would have turned a banker's hair gray, and never one of them but brought me huge returns. That property is of negligible value to me—how negligible you don't know—and yet it will be very valuable to you and Sheila as a haven of security that you can call your own. As a rich aunt, I have every legal and moral and ethical right to give it to you—and as a poor but deserving nephew, it is your cue to say 'Thank you' and accept."

"You're a brick, Aunt Ocky," said the young man soberly, for the second time that afternoon. "Sheila spoke of a check for a thousand—"

"For your honeymoon. If you don't splurge too hard, there'll be some of it left for initial expenses."

"You bet there will." He drew a long breath. "Thank you, Aunt Ocky," he said obediently. "I accept. But, look here—there'll be a holy row when my father hears what you've done. He'll want your head on a charger!"

"Better men than he have wanted that—and it's still neatly articulated to the end of my spinal column!" She gave a low, reminiscent chuckle. "There was a Chinese general, once, whom it was my privilege to annoy, and he went so far as to put quite a flattering price on it. He lost his own! Shall I tell you the story?"

He eagerly assented, and the gory narrative of the unlucky Chinese head-hunter occupied them until dinner was announced.

It was scarcely to be wondered at that Copley was exuberantly cheerful during the meal. His aunt might really have succeeded in her wish to graft a

bit of her nerve on to his backbone, for he felt a new sense of self-reliance and resolution. Once married to Sheila, and with the immediate future provided for by the generosity of Miss Ocky, he had no doubt of his ability to pluck a pearl necklace from the world that was his oyster! He knew quite a bit about the tanning business, a knowledge acquired casually during summer vacations, and he also knew—from Sheila—something of Graham's disappointed ambitions in respect to a partnership; if his prospective father-in-law elected to seek his fortune in another field, there was no reason why he shouldn't hitch his wagon to Graham's star as Graham had once hitched his to Varr's. The golden sun of finance was rising in the East for him, and he and Sheila, hand in hand, would walk into the dawn—

So ran his thoughts, and between them he kept up a flow of badinage with Ocky, rallied his quiet mother into some show of life, and even directed a few flippancies at the glum figure which graced the head of the table. The tanner was taciturn, abstracted, and the only show of emotion registered by his wooden countenance was a flash of uneasiness when Copley made some casual reference to Leslie Sherwood. Miss Ocky did not miss that, and again she wondered what lay behind.

His son's airiness of manner distinctly jarred on Simon. A young man just bereft of his allowance and under orders to renounce his lady-love had no right to act like that. It wasn't natural—or else he had something up his youthful sleeve. Humph. That might bear looking into!

"What are you going to do this evening, Copley?" he demanded, as he returned the quill toothpick to his pocket and rose from table.

"Nothing special, sir. Read a while and turn in early."

"I'm going to be busy with some work for an hour or so. I wish you would come to my study at nine. Want to talk to you."

Copley's heart sank as he nodded acquiescence. Then it rose again, for his eyes had strayed across to Miss Ocky and the sight of his powerful ally braced his courage—just as Simon, the day before, had gained fresh confidence from the glimpse of a cabbage. Nothing could harm him while Aunt Ocky held up his arm!

Punctually at nine o'clock he passed through the living-room on his way to the appointment, and paused for a word with Ocky, who was reading by the lamp in the center of the room. She had checked him with a gesture.

"What does he want to see you about?"

"I don't know. Just a snappy laying down of the laws of the Medes and the Persians, I expect."

"Well, don't quarrel with him!"

"You mean—he's my father, after all? Right. It takes two to make a quarrel anyway."

"The most ridiculous aphorism ever coined! I've made lots of them myself, single-handed. And it was policy, not filial respect, that dictated my caution. If you quarrel, you'll lose your temper; if you lose your temper, you may let something slip that will reveal your plans."

"Yours is the sapience of the serpent! But what could he do if he did know the truth? We're both of age."

"Just the same, it's a good generalship to avoid risks. I have learned to leave little to chance."

"Aunt Ocky, will you come and live with us when

we are really settled? I've an idea I could profit a lot if I sat at your knees for a while!"

"I wish I could accept your invitation," Miss Ocky answered gravely. Her eyes left his face and seemed to shield her thoughts behind a film of blankness. "I'm afraid I have other—plans," she added quietly. "It's after nine—don't get the habit of unpunctuality."

He knocked on the study door at the end of the room, and closed it after him when he had entered in response to a gruff command.

For some little time Miss Ocky tried to center her thoughts on her book, lifting her head to listen now and again as she paused in her reading to cut pages with her two-edged souvenir of Teheran. The conversation in the study appeared to be flowing along smoothly. She could not catch any words, nor did she try to; a shrewd listener can glean a good deal merely by interpreting the vocal tones of the different speakers. Her ear told her that Simon was certainly laying down the law but with no more than his usual acidity, and that his son was pleading his cause patiently and without acrimony. It was natural enough that he should hope up to the eleventh hour for a favorable change in his father's attitude; a foolish hope but a pardonable one—

Abruptly, Miss Ocky's ear cocked itself to a more alert angle. The voices in the study had suddenly altered. Simon had said something in his usual dictatorial accents, and Copley, instead of the soft answer that turneth away wrath, had snapped a crisp rejoinder in louder tones than any he had yet used. For a minute the two men were speaking at once, discharging verbal salvos at point-blank range. Miss Ocky shrugged her shoulders and smiled rather

scornfully to herself. She was not surprised. Lucy had told her of Copley's youthful flashes of temper, which still persisted, though he had learned in some measure to control them.

She was trying to guess the probable outcome of the battle of words when her thoughts were interrupted from another quarter. The bell of the front door had rung violently, and Bates hurried from the pantry and along the hallway to answer it. Miss Ocky wondered who in the world could be calling at such an hour.

She knew in a moment. There was the briefest of parleys with the butler, and then, through the door of the living-room, she saw two men hurry rearward through the hall in the direction of the study. Evidently they proposed to present themselves before Varr without the formality of announcing themselves through Bates.

The first of the two she recognized instantly—it was Graham, the manager of the tannery, whom she had met several times. And he was Sheila's father! An awkward occasion for him to appear! The second man she did not know at all. He was smaller and slighter than Graham, a pale, anæmic creature. He lagged behind his companion, and as the latter kept a grip on his arm as they proceeded, he gave the effect of a lamb going reluctantly to the sacrifice.

Graham's face had been deeply flushed—so much she had had time to note as he swept past the open door. She heard him knock at the study—from sheer force of habit, no doubt, as he could not have waited for a summons to enter before flinging back the door. His voice carried clear to Miss Ocky's ear as he swiftly took up some remark he had caught from within.

"That will do, young man! I can fight my own battles with no help from you—!"

Obviously, events were marching to a proper row. Miss Ocky had no objection to rows when she could participate in them, but to sit by and listen to others enjoying themselves was merely boresome. She put her book on the table, marking her place with the Persian dagger, rose and left the room. The angry voices from the study followed her upstairs as she sought the quiet of her own room.

Here she found Janet Mackay, seated in a corner with a dozen new handkerchiefs of linen that she was adorning with exquisitely embroidered initials. She looked up, but continued her work without speaking.

"Hello, Janet. Why aren't you at the movies this evening?"

"They're showing a gripping picture of purple passion," replied Miss Mackay succinctly. She snipped a thread, deftly inserted fresh thread in her needle and added casually, "It's a small world."

This was a sample of Janet's cautious, crab-like approach to some topic of interest. Miss Ocky recognized it and soon had encouraged her to persevere.

"A great thought, Janet, but scarcely a new one. What brought it to your mind?"

"A piece of news that Bates was telling me over our supper. He got it this afternoon from the postman. Did ye know that old Simon's kitchen garden had been looted the other night?"

"No."

"It was. The fellow took a few tomatoes and did a wee bit damage with his big feet. Old Simon found out who it was, and he had him arrested."

"Humph. He would. The man was probably hungry, poor devil."

"Aye; so they're saying in the town. No matter. Old Simon appeared against him this morning in court and they sent him to the lock-up for thirty days."

"Ninety meals! It might be worse. Who was it?"

"A young fellow named Charlie Maxon."

"Charlie Maxon! Well, he'll be no loss to the community for a month!"

"Aye?" Janet looked up sharply from her work. "Ye know him?"

"He's one of the leaders of the strike. I've spoken with him once or twice. A bad egg, I should think."

"Aye, and his parents before him," said Janet Mackay. "They used to live around the corner from me in Aberdeen. I can remember Charlie as a bairn, and even then he was always into mischief. He's no whit better now."

"And he turns up again in this little out-of-the-way place in America! I see now why you say the world's a small one. Queer, but it's the way things sometimes happen. Are you sure it's the same?"

"Aye. Three times I've seen him in town and thought his face familiar, he looks so like his father. When Bates spoke his name, I knew."

"Well, I take it you won't remind him of the old times in bonnie Scotland!"

"No fear!" said the older woman promptly. Then she looked keenly at her mistress. "Aren't ye up early to-night?"

"Simon is having a row with Copley in the study." Miss Ocky shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace. "I didn't care to listen any longer."

"He's having a row with the boy, is he?" Janet regarded her work critically and bit off a thread neatly. "The old deevil! I'm glad I have been with you all this time, Miss Ocky, and not around that 'un! I've heard a few things about him from Bates." She threaded another needle with deft fingers. "He's a rare curmudgeon. D'ye suppose he'll go on like this to the end of his days?"

"Can you teach an old dog new tricks?" asked Miss Ocky contemptuously. "You should know better at your age, Janet." She got up and strolled out on the balcony to see the brilliant stars in a sky of velvet blackness. "Quarter past ten already. I shan't need you for anything to-night. If you insist on ruining your eyes with that work any longer, go off to your own room and let me get to bed!"

VII: Out of the Past

WHEN the curtain rose on the scene of that interview between the tanner and his son, Simon was discovered at his desk laboriously making entries in his small, cramped handwriting in the red notebook that held so many of his secrets. He did not look up until he had completed the memorandum which engaged him; when he swung his chair around he still held the closed book in his hand and occasionally pounded his knee with it when he wished to emphasize some point in the ensuing conversation.

He had his notions of good generalship no less than his shrewd sister-in-law, and he did not make the mistake of pitching his prefatory remarks on a note of hostility. He was fishing for information. He hoped to get a clue to the reason for Copley's sudden elevation of spirit, if a reason really existed.

"I was a little pressed for ready money at the beginning of the month and did not see my way to making the usual deposit to your account," he began, utterly indifferent, so he were not caught, that he was being deliberately untruthful. "Hope it didn't embarrass you. Things are easier, now, and I will attend to the matter to-morrow morning."

"Why—why, thank you, sir!" This was so unexpected that the young man was as bewildered as if a mine had exploded at his feet. "That is very good of you. I had no idea you were—were strapped." He flushed. "As a matter of fact, I thought—I thought—"

"Go on. What did you think?"

"Well, sir, I thought you were just giving me a reminder of my absolute dependence on you. I've been a pretty useless animal, I know."

"Why the past tense? Are you a useful animal now?"

"N-no, sir. I guess it would be exaggerating the facts if I claimed that! But my intentions are good." Simon's lips lifted. "I want to get busy at something useful right away."

"Humph. You're just out of college and the general idea has been that you would take a post-graduate course in the Columbia Law School; that is your mother's wish. The tannery, if I may so express it, has always been a stench in her nostrils. She is not the first woman to quarrel with the honest source of her bread-and-butter." He stared at his son from beneath level brows. "Well? Have plans changed?"

"I want to make money, sir, and it would be years before I could hope to do that at the Bar."

"I will undertake to continue your allowance until you have established yourself."

"Thank you, father, but it's not the same thing. I want to stand on my own feet—and as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"Because I wish—I intend—to marry Sheila Graham."

"You shan't do it!"

It was the drop of the handkerchief; steel rang upon steel, and no buttons tipped their foils. It was careful fencing at first, thrust and parry, parry and thrust, until Simon lost patience at length and put all his viciousness into one deadly lunge.

"Now, see here, Copley! If you persist in dis-

regarding my wishes let me tell you what will happen; I will throw Billy Graham out of his job and I'll use every scrap of influence I possess to keep him from getting another! Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" The notebook slapped on his knee. "Ruin your own prospects if you're fool enough to do it; ruin Sheila's, if she's fool enough to let you; but *stop there!* Maybe she'll help you to stop when she knows that your stubbornness and hers will be a knife in her father's back! She *will* know, too, for you can't go ahead in common decency without telling her what it will mean to him!" The tanner leaned forward, an ugly light of triumph in his eyes, raised his free hand and slowly clenched his fist. "I've got—you—right—*there!*"

"Father!" The bitterest shame in the world, the shame of a son for his father, was in that cry. The young man rose from his chair and stood looking at Simon Varr almost incredulously. "You couldn't do *that!* You couldn't do anything so contemptible! Do what you please to me, but take back that threat before I—I despise you!"

"Despise me? *You!* Ha! I'll take back nothing, and I'll use my advantage to its full extent. Mark that! I've said you shan't marry Sheila Graham—and what I say *goes!*"

"Not any longer with me!" flared his son at white heat. For a full minute they indulged in a furious exchange of half-incoherent insults before Copley's voice rose clear above his father's. "I will marry Sheila as soon as she'll have me, and I warn you to keep your hands off Graham!"

It was then that the study door was flung open and a thick, heavy voice cut through their abusive volleys.

"That will do, young man! I can fight my own battles with no help from you!"

Graham came into the study, dragging with him the shrinking figure of the clerk, Langhorn. His intrusion was startling enough, but there was still a deeper significance in the slight lurch that the manager gave as he halted, glowering, before Simon Varr. His flushed face and blurred utterance contributed their testimony to a fact that was ominous in itself; he had been drinking, drinking heavily, though he was notably abstemious by habit. Varr got hastily to his feet, so threatening was his manager's attitude.

"What do you want here?" he demanded curtly, though he knew well enough what Langhorn's presence betokened. "What do you mean by bursting in like that? Are you drunk?"

Possibly the crisp question went far to sober Graham, who was plainly trying to shake off the effect of his potations as if the sense of the undignified figure he was cutting was just beginning to filter into his confused brain. He straightened up, steadied himself.

"I want a talk with you, Mr. Varr. It's overdue, I think. I've been waiting for you to make a move in a certain direction, and it seems I've been fooling myself nicely." He spoke slowly. "More than a score of years I've worked for you, Mr. Varr, and not you nor any man can say I haven't done well by you and the business. I'm entitled to something more than the salary of a hired hand—Mr. Bolt agrees with me there—and I've been hoping that you would give me some chance to invest my savings in a business I've grown up with. I've earned the right—"

"Stop pinning medals on yourself and come to the point!"

"I've been wondering if maybe you didn't understand how I felt and if I oughtn't to speak straight out, but yesterday afternoon this man, Langhorn, told me he had heard you and Mr. Bolt discussing me. He told me you said you would never give me a partnership, that—that you were going to throw me out so I would go to Rochester, taking Sheila with me! It—it nearly knocked me off my feet, Mr. Varr; it's no wonder I took a drink or so too much this evening. Now I've brought this man here so you can say if he told me the truth—or so you can call him a liar to his face."

"You needn't have gone to that trouble!" snarled Simon, purple with rage. "He's a sneaking hound, but he told you the truth this time, and I'd have told you all you wanted to know without your bringing him along!"

"Then—it's true? You're going to let me out after all these years?"

"Yes!" The word was fairly shouted. From temper and sheer exasperation, Simon was in a towering passion. He flung the notebook he was holding onto his desk, raised both hands above his head and shook them in a frenzy at the two men. "Yes! And you can start going by getting out of here, now, and taking your eavesdropping pal with you! Get out—and don't either of you ever come back!"

Langhorn wriggled free and stepped out into the hall. Graham did not leave without a parting shot—directed via Copley, who had been a silent witness of the scene.

"This is your fault more than any one else's," he said, "but I know you didn't mean it." He glanced

expressively at Varr and back again. "I hope you're proud of your father!" he added dryly, and followed the departing clerk from the house.

There was a brief silence in the study for a moment or two after the thud of the closing front door came to their ears. Then Copley made to leave the room, unchecked by his father, who stood watching him in sullen mood. The young man paused on the threshold and turned to face his father.

"So," he said evenly, "you were threatening me with a course of action that you had already determined on! Isn't that so?"

A wave of color suffused Varr's face and answered him.

"Come back here!" snapped Simon. "I've not finished with you!"

"Yes, you have, father," said Copley. "Just that!"

White to his lips, he turned and left the room. Varr listened to his retreating steps and to a second closing of the front door as he went out of the house into the dark night.

Alone, Varr sank into the chair before his desk and tried to take stock of his position. For once, it seemed, he had not only failed to have his own way but had definitely come out at the short end of the horn. It would be difficult to replace Graham—he could admit that to himself. It would be impossible to replace Copley—! He did not try to deceive himself with false hopes in that connection; there had been a finality in his son's last utterance that rang true.

What curse had come upon him? What malign fate had led Graham there that evening at the very moment when he could least afford to have his trick-

ery revealed to his son? *Why was everything going wrong?*

The solace of tobacco was denied him, since he did not smoke. His shaken nerves cried for some attention, and the faint odor of whisky that still lingered in the room recalled him to Graham's resource. He stepped to the door and called Bates, who came from the rear of the house.

"Fetch me a glass, and that decanter of Bourbon."

The butler returned in a minute with a tray. He placed it on a small table near the desk and looked inquiringly at Simon.

"Will you wish anything else, sir?"

"No. Go to bed."

"Thank you, sir. Everything is closed but the front door. Mr. Copley is still out. Good night, sir."

Varr poured himself a stiff three fingers and tossed it off at a gulp, making a wry face as the fiery liquor stung his unaccustomed throat. Otherwise the effect was excellent. He decanted another large drink and was about to take a sip of it when his eyes, above the glass, chanced to rest on a piece of brown paper in a pigeonhole of his desk.

Abruptly, he put down his drink, drew the paper out, and read the last lines of the message so curiously received.

"Take heed to thy ways and mend them, lest thou be destroyed by the thunderbolts of wrath!"

Bah! He flung the paper back into its hole, yet continued to eye it with a feeling of uneasiness that required another swallow of whisky to allay. Ah—

that was better! He took a second, and new life and courage flowed into him with the liquor.

He threw back his head and squared his shoulders defiantly. Blast them—blast them one and all, root and branch! Graham—Copley—this lunatic Monk—! Threaten *him*, would they? Let 'em look out for themselves—he'd show 'em!

He raised his clenched fist preparatory to bringing it down with a crash upon the desk. It did not fall; it stayed aloft while a sudden fear leaped into his eyes. He bent forward, his head turned sideways, his ears straining to catch a sound that had come to them from a distance.

A siren was blowing—the siren whose raucous wail gave warning to the people of Hambleton when fire threatened their homes. Tensely, Simon counted the long blasts. One—two—three! A short pause. One—two—three!

Thirty-three! *The tannery!*

He sprang erect. Instinct born of habit impelled him to slam down the roll-top cover of his desk before he rushed from the room and down the hall. He snatched his soft hat from a rack as he reached with his other hand for the heavy latch of the front door.

Two minutes later he was guiding his light car down the curving hillside road, driving fast but carefully. He made such good time that he arrived at the scene of the fire several minutes before the local Fire Department had assembled its hats, its equipment and itself, and had gotten its apparatus to the field of action.

A small mob of men, women and delighted children was gathered in the open space before the office building and the gate. They were milling about in

excited groups, eager enough to lend a hand but hopelessly confused without the guidance of a leader. Varr thrust through them impatiently, opened the door—that the watchman had thoughtfully left unbarred—and hurried through the building to the rear premises.

A column of black smoke shot with leaping crimson flames told him where to direct his swift steps. The fire, evidently, was confined for the moment to one, or possibly two, of the small outbuildings. These were used largely for storage purposes; they were crammed full of packing cases, extra carboys of acids and loose heaps of bark—a raft of stuff that was highly combustible. A glance told Simon that they were doomed.

Through a haze of greasy smoke he glimpsed an active figure—the only human being in sight except himself—and he hastened to its side. It was Fay, the night-watchman, a powerful, stocky man who clearly did not share the tanner's pessimistic conviction. He had ransacked the premises for every hand fire-extinguisher he could find, had brought them to the burning buildings and, with fine optimism, was now spraying their contents on the edges of the blaze.

"Stop wasting that stuff!" commanded Varr. "Nothing to be done here! All we can do is try to save the rest of the outfit."

The watchman withdrew, reluctantly at first but then with a succession of leaps and bounds as a muffled explosion from the interior of the building marked the passing of some overheated container. He halted at a safe distance, wiping his smoke-grimed face, until Varr rejoined him. A faint cheer

from beyond the boundary fence carried to them over the roar of the blaze.

"Guess that's the Fire Department," grunted Fay. "About time they turned up!"

"There's oil in that fire!" snapped the tanner, gazing at the black smoke. "Where'd it come from?"

"Two five-gallon tins of it, brought from D building, spilled on the floor and a match chucked into it. I seen them lying on their side in there at the start of it."

"Humph. Brought from D building, eh? Then there's no doubt of *this* being the work of an incendiary!"

"Doubt? Huh! I'll tell the world there ain't no doubt! I seen the feller that did it!"

"Ah! Could you recognize him? Who was it? Why in thunder didn't you grab him? Where'd he get to?"

Before Fay could even begin to sort out these questions and try to answer the easier ones, their quick conversation was interrupted by the appearance of a resplendent figure at their elbows. A short, stout man was Gus Wimpelheimer, grocer and butcher by profession and in his lighter moments Chief of the Hambleton Fire Department. His round little body was now quivering with pleased excitement.

"Evening, gentlemen!" he greeted them politely. He glanced at the fire and wrinkled an expert nose. "Kerosene!" he pronounced.

"The thought had occurred to us," retorted Simon.

Marshal Wimpelheimer trotted briskly toward the fire for a better view, and trotted briskly back again as another carboy let go.

"Bad business," he reported cheerfully. "Nasty

wind springing up," he added happily. "Blowing straight for the other buildings, too!" He put a little whistle to his lips and its squeaky notes brought two satellites of the main luminary. "Hustle out those chemicals and get 'em to work on the blaze. Rout out all the buckets you can find, and send for more. Call on that crowd out there for volunteers and get a chain started from the stream to these other buildings. Douse 'em—douse 'em *good!* Don't stop till I tell you to. Fay! You'll know where there are any ladders; fetch them out!"

"Yes, Chief!" came the admiring chorus, and the men sprang off to execute his orders. He rubbed his hands together with satisfaction and turned brightly to the tanner.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Varr," he said indulgently. "We'll handle this little affair for you!"

Worry was not exactly Varr's predominant emotion. There was small reason to fear that the remainder of the buildings would not be kept intact, and there was ample insurance on the property, including contents. The blaze could cause him inconvenience when business was resumed, that was all.

The real significance of the affair lay in the fact that the fire had been of incendiary origin. His face was stormy as he contemplated that angle of the situation. Who was his enemy? Who had made this second determined effort to burn the tannery? Second, for he could no longer consider the first an accident in the light of this new attempt. In his mind he had always held the thought that Charlie Maxon might have been the perpetrator of the earlier outrage, but Maxon was now in jail and could not be guilty of this. Had he a confederate? Was this

fire a token of resentment on the part of his friends for the way he had been treated?

He fumed with angry impotence. How would he fight this unseen, unknown foe? He could take his suspicions to Steiner—but what could that futile fellow do? He would fiddle around and scratch his head and mumble inanities! Varr gritted his teeth in helpless rage as he watched the men fighting their slow but certain battle to victory over the flames.

The crowd outside the premises speedily discovered that this drama was hidden from them by the high fence, and they were forbidden to pass the guard stationed at the office door by the ubiquitous Wimpelheimer. The nimbler-witted among them reflected that they might obtain a good view of the proceedings from the rising ground to the left of the tannery, and they drifted there by twos and threes until quite a respectable number of people were sprinkled over the field through which the shortcut ran to Simon's house. From this vantage point they could look down into the tannery and watch the performance to their hearts' content.

A little to one side of the crowd stood a woman alone, her gaze turned steadily on the burning buildings. Several passers-by spoke to her by name, and she answered them mechanically without turning her head. Finally, one of these greetings was overheard by a man who was standing a few yards distant; he turned sharply to look at the woman addressed, then approached her rather hesitatingly. He took off his hat and bowed.

"I beg pardon," he said pleasantly. "Is this Miss Copley?"

"Yes." Miss Ocky peered at him through the

dark, then gave a little exclamation. "Leslie Sherwood!"

"Correct. How are you, Ocky? It seems like a lifetime since I last saw you."

"Twenty-odd years. I heard you were back for the first time since you—since you left the parent nest!"

"Yes," answered Sherwood quietly. Then he added casually—too casually to be convincing to her sharp intuitions—"How is Lucy?"

"She is—oh, pretty well."

"Er—happy, and all that sort of thing?"

"As happy as she could expect to be. She married Simon Varr, you know."

"Yes—I know." He disregarded her sarcastic implication. "I hear you've been back only a short time yourself. Staying at Lucy's?"

"Staying at Simon's!" corrected Miss Ocky grimly. "I suppose you know that's his beloved tannery a-fire down there?"

"So they tell me. I saw the flames from my house and thought I'd stroll down for the show."

"I was just turning in myself when I heard the siren," said Miss Ocky. "Rather pretty effect, don't you think?"

"Beautiful," agreed Sherwood. He surveyed the scene of the fire critically. "Beautiful—only I'm afraid they are going to save most of the buildings."

"Eh? What's that?" cried Miss Ocky sharply. Then she gave a chuckle. "Did you say 'afraid'?"

"Are you a friend of Simon's?"

"I detest the creature," she answered promptly. "And you?"

"It would afford me great pleasure," stated Sherwood calmly, "if that were Simon's funeral pyre."

Miss Ocky pursed her lips in a soft, almost inaudible whistle. She was thinking back to the expression on her brother-in-law's face when this man's name was mentioned. Simon had been afraid! And here was Leslie Sherwood expressing, not fear, but—but what?

"Any one would think you hated the poor man," she suggested at length.

"That," said Mr. Sherwood, "exactly expresses my feeling toward him."

"But—but, Leslie—" Miss Ocky was groping for the truth back of all this—"I don't understand! Why do you hate a man you haven't even seen for over twenty years?"

"Some hates have very lasting qualities, Ocky. They endure for ever and a day."

"Then—whatever it was—happened before you left here?"

"Yes. Simon came between me and something that I wanted—and did it in a way that made a mortal enemy of me. Sounds theatrical, doesn't it? But it's true. He contrived at the same time to cause the trouble between me and my father that has kept me from returning to Hambleton until now, when the old gentleman has ended with worldly cares."

"I wish you'd tell me the whole story in words of one syllable," begged Miss Ocky. "It's not that I'm just curious. I'm trying to learn all that I can about Simon. He interests me as a—as a specimen."

"I would hardly have told you as much if I weren't willing to tell you all. I'm puzzling over a problem that might be simplified by a woman's wit. We can't talk here, though. Too public."

"Suppose you escort me home. I've a torch, and I'm going up this short-cut. We can chat on the

way." She glanced downhill. "This excitement is about over; shall we start?"

"Whenever you please."

They were turning away side-by-side when a fitful gust of wind swept up to them from the direction of the sinking flames. There is only one thing more malodorous than a tannery, and that is a burning tannery. Miss Ocky choked.

"Pwhew!" she gasped. "It smells like—like—"

"Like the soul of Simon Varr," supplied Sherwood promptly.

VIII: Two Victims of Theft

VARR remained at the tannery until the last dying ember had been extinguished. Not till then did Marshal August Wimpelheimer come gayly up to him, his regalia a trifle the worse for wear and his breath coming a little short from his exertions but his expression that of one who has been hugely enjoying himself. He saluted with a flourish.

"All over, Mr. Varr! I told you we'd handle it. I'm sorry we couldn't save those first two buildings, but they had too much of a start. Full of that inflammable stuff and with a breeze like this blowing sparks as big as my helmet"—the article of attire referred to was nearly as large as himself—"we were lucky to get control—"

"Have you seen anything of Fay about?"

"Your watchman? Yes, sir, he was in the thick of everything! I'd like to add him to my Department. But the boys all did splendidly—smoke-eaters, Mr. Varr, every mother's son of 'em! I hope you noticed, sir, that when it came to volunteers for the bucket-gang a lot of your workmen stepped up. They forgot about the strike and pitched in with both hands! It shows there's a heap of good in human nature."

"It shows they know which side their bread is buttered!" grunted the tanner. "How would they get their jobs back if they let the whole outfit burn? Eh?"

The Fire Marshal flushed, but the grocer bit back

the words that trembled on his lips. Little Wimpy had gallantry to spare when it came to facing fire, which is a clean foe and a clean fighter, but his courage stopped there. Varr owned his store, Varr held a chattel mortgage on his fixtures—and there were the little Wimpies to be thought of!

“Good night, sir!” he said, and went sadly home.

Simon Varr joined the stragglers who were leaving by way of the hall through the office building, but he did not go with them as far as the exit. He ascended the creaky stairs, went into his office and snapped on the electric light. He had seen nothing of Fay, but he confidently expected the watchman to seek him out as soon as possible.

In this he was not disappointed. The man had only paused to remove some of the traces of his activities before presenting himself for Simon’s inquisition.

“Well, Fay, what can you tell me about this? Where were you when you discovered the fire?”

“I was making my second round at twenty-five minutes to eleven. You’ll remember, sir, you left orders that I should make another trip about the premises five minutes after my regular round, which was ten-thirty in this case. That was a good idea, sir, if you’ll let me say so; it certainly led to my seeing the fire right after it started.”

“That scoundrelly fire bug was watching you, depend on that!”

“Yes, sir; there’s dozens of places he could keep a look-out from, once he got inside. Soon as he saw me finish one round and go out front, he commenced his dirty work.”

“You say you caught a glimpse of him?”

“A poor one, sir. I was just quietly passing one

of those storage buildings when I saw a flicker of light beneath the doorsill. It was too soon to hear the crackle of burning wood or smell any smoke, but I knew what was up. I pushed open the door. That was when I saw the two oil-tins lying on their sides and the whole floor flooded with the stuff. There was smoke enough, then, sir! That's why I could only get a poor look through it at the feller."

"He was in the building when you saw him?"

"Yes, sir—and out of it again like a deer, by the door at the other end, as soon as he saw me. I couldn't run through the flames, and by the time I'd jumped back and cut around the building, he was lost in the darkness. I swept my torch this way and that, but never a sign of him. I heard him, though," he added significantly.

"Yes? Where?"

"He stumbled over something near the left-hand corner of the yard where the fence runs down to the brook. That tells us what we didn't know before, sir. He doesn't come over the fence, nor under it; he either wades the brook around the end of it, or else scrambles around by way of the bank. Unless I'm all wrong, sir, we'll find his footprints there in the morning."

"We'll find them there now," Varr corrected him curtly. "You have your torch? Come along, then."

He extinguished the light in the office and led the way downstairs and out into the yard. They passed the smoking ruins of the two destroyed buildings and came in a few seconds to the spot described by Fay. Varr took the torch from him and played its beam on the ground near the juncture of fence and brook.

"You're right!" he exclaimed. "Here are foot-

prints—and that piece of wire is what you heard him trip over. Take a close look at those prints, Fay, while I hold the light. Don't muck 'em up with your own dainty feet! Anything noticeable about them?"

The conscientious watchman dropped on his hands and knees and seemed to fairly sniff at the marks like a bloodhound.

"No, sir," he reported regretfully. "They're just footprints."

Varr corroborated the truth of this when he bent to make his own examination. The prints were sharp and distinct, but their very clearness only added to the general obscurity. They were large and clumsy, rude of outline, and had obviously been made by a pair of heavy shoes such as workmen wear—and they might have been worn by any one of a million workmen! Varr grunted his disgust as he sought in vain for some little mark by which they might be distinguished from two million like them.

"A big man," was the extent of his deductions.

"Yes, sir, that was what he looked like to me. I wish I could have seen his face—though I've a notion he might have been masked."

"Masked!" Varr fell back a step. "Masked?"

"Why—yes, sir. That wouldn't be so unlikely, considering the errand he come on! But I'm not sure—I had just that moment's look at him through a swirl of smoke."

"Could you tell how he was dressed?"

"He was in black, sir. I thought so at first, and the way he got out of sight in the darkness makes it seem likely. What, sir?"

Varr had muttered an oath. A figure dressed in black, with a mask! That was circumstantial enough;

the Monk had been busy—launching a thunderbolt of wrath, presumably! Simon's lip curled; Ocky's familiar of the Spanish Inquisition was a pretty scurvy knave if he would stoop to firebrands by night—!

"Fay," he commanded abruptly. "Keep a close tongue in your head about this. I've my reasons for it. Don't tell any one of these footprints until I give you permission. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied the watchman dutifully and dolefully. He had rather been looking forward to public kudos and acclaim. "You'll tell Steiner, sir, I suppose?"

"Do as I tell you, and leave the rest to me!" Varr returned sharply. He handed back the borrowed torch, first glancing at his watch by its light. "Only half-past one! I could have sworn I'd been down here the best part of the night. Come along!"

They returned to the office building, Varr leaving a few more directions for increased and unceasing watchfulness as the exhausted Fay dropped into his chair in the front hall. Then Simon betook himself to his car and drove slowly homeward.

His bad temper had largely worn itself out on the various irritations that had kept it jumping, and in sooth the time had come for anger to give way to calculation. There were so many things to be thought of! Enough to make a man's head spin!

The matter of Copley by itself—! He did not know yet just what was back of the boy's angry declaration that his father was "finished" with him. Was he planning to leave home? A nice row there'd be with a wounded mother! And Copley—Simon judged others by himself—would be sure to make

the most of his grievance with her over a parental stratagem that had miscued!

The thought of that nasty few minutes in the study reminded him of Graham. Another coil. Jason Bolt would have some bitter comment on the wisdom of firing a useful man with no substitute in sight; Jason had a rough tongue at times for all his good-nature. That would be still another quarrel—and he couldn't fire Jason!

And this blasted Monk, with his anonymous letters and talk of thunderbolts! He must be taken seriously after this night's work. True, there was no definite proof to connect him with the fire but it was too probable a hypothesis to be lightly dismissed. What had he better do to cut that fellow's claws? There was hope, of course, that he had worked off his spleen in firing the tannery, and also that a wholesome fear of being caught and convicted of arson might cool his spirit! Unless he was mad—!

He left his car in the garage and locked the sliding-door behind him with a feeling of relief that the balance of the night was likely to pass without further incident. As he walked from the garage to the house, he remembered the decanter and glass still standing on the study table and welcomed the idea of another bracer before bed. He had earned it.

The darkened house, as he approached it, provided him with a new grievance. Every one asleep! What did they care if the tannery went up in smoke? More than likely they'd be *glad*!

It was not in him to feel a sense of shame when he presently learned that his assumption of their indifference was unjustified. As he let himself in with his key, a slipped step shuffled from the rear to

greet him. It was Bates, sleepy but inquisitive.

"The fire's out. Yes, it was the work of an incendiary. The actual damage is immaterial." Varr's answers were curt. "Every one asleep, I suppose?"

"I expect so, sir. Miss Ocky went down to the fire, but she came home long ago and told us it was under control. Miss Lucy came downstairs and waited until she heard that, then she went to bed. She wanted you to wake her when you came in and tell her all that happened."

"Humph. I'll go up in a few minutes. And—my son?"

"He's not in, sir. I haven't seen him all evening."

"Very well. Go to bed. Leave the door unlatched."

The old butler wished him good night and padded softly up the front stairs. Simon struck a match and went along the darkened hall to his study, where he struck another and lighted the wall-lamp near his desk. It was then he noticed something that caused him to fall back a pace and utter a sharp exclamation. The roll-top cover had been thrust up to its fullest extent—and the same glance showed him that his red-leather notebook, which he distinctly remembered tossing on to the desk, was gone! With a cry of pure rage, he darted to the door of the study.

"Bates!" he shouted. "Bates! Come down here! At once!"

The butler heard, and hurried to obey the urgency in Simon's voice. He found the tanner standing before his desk and examining its rather inadequate lock.

"We've been burgled," announced the victim grimly. "It just needed that to round the night off nicely."

"Burgled! Robbed! Surely not, sir!"

"Don't talk like an idiot! Get your torch. We'd best have a look around, though there's no doubt the dirty devil got what he came for! Where were you while—"

"What is it *now*?" interrupted a plaintive and sleepy voice from the doorway. "Another fire?"

Varr wheeled toward the speaker and saw Miss Ocky regarding him with wondering eyes. She had slipped on a vivid negligee, a trophy from some Eastern bazaar, and she made a most attractive picture in the soft, kindly light from the lamp as she stood there looking her inquiry at one and the other of the two men. Simon was somehow glad to see her, for much as he disliked her, he admitted her level-headed shrewdness and welcomed the help of another brain in coping with a situation that was rapidly getting beyond him.

"Some one has broken open my desk and taken the notebook in which I keep memoranda of formulas and experiments," he explained gruffly. "I don't miss anything else. It must have been done within the last few hours."

"I see. I thought I detected a note of tragedy in the way you hollered for Bates just now." She eyed the butler reflectively as she drew a silver case from a pocket of the negligee and lighted a cigarette. "Bates—I see you are still dressed! Where have you been for the past few hours?"

"Right in the pantry, Miss Ocky, except when I came out to let you in a while back. I heard nothing, nor no one."

She turned, as if to measure distances with her eye. "Right in the pantry," she repeated. "Fifteen

yards—and two closed doors—away. Still, it's queer you heard nothing."

"I was reading a paper, Miss Ocky, and I dozed once or twice."

"Ah. That probably accounts for it. Have you found out yet how he got into the house?" She moved her shoulders slightly as she put the question. "I can feel a draught on the back of my neck, now. Something is open—in the living-room, perhaps. Did you lock up as carefully as usual this evening, Bates? Things were rather upset!"

"That didn't make any difference, Miss Ocky," he protested eagerly. "I had closed everything as usual—I had even started for bed—before the siren blew and I heard Mr. Varr hurrying out to the garage. Nothing was left unlocked."

At the first mention of the living-room, Simon had secured a small torch from a nearby stand. Together, they trooped through the door leading to the parlor, where he flashed the light on the two sets of tall French windows that gave on to a side veranda. They exclaimed in chorus at the sight of one pair ajar.

"That's that," said Miss Ocky. She took the flash from Simon, opened the window wide and turned the light on the planking of the piazza. "Nothing to be seen by this light!" She directed the beam at the fastenings of the window. "Huh! Didn't take much to force this affair! Your defenses are pretty flimsy, Simon!"

"You're not in the heart of Asia, Ocky. We don't go in much for fortifications in this country."

"Well, I could wish you did. I don't want to wake up some night and find a burglar going off with

my treasures. What did you say this one took—a notebook?"

"Yes."

"What's the idea? Who wants an old notebook?"

"Exactly what I'm asking myself, Ocky." Simon sent a sideways look at the old butler as if reluctant to speak too openly. "It was full of important data relative to tanning processes. Not much of a loss to me, for I know 'em all by heart—but it might be extremely useful to any one else in the business or—or to any one who might be expecting to go into it—" His voice trailed off as if he were lost in some thought that had just struck him. "Humph!" he grunted.

"What is it?" demanded Ocky alertly.

"Nothing—nothing to be discussed now, anyway. Bates!"

"Sir?" The butler had just finished lighting the lamp on the center table and he glanced at Varr with expressionless face. "Yes, sir?"

"Stop fiddling with that lamp. There's nothing to be done to-night. And look here—I don't want this business mentioned to the other servants or any one else until I have decided just what action I shall take. Understand? Go to bed, then,—and I hope you stay there this time!"

"One moment, Bates." Miss Ocky had moved over to the table and was contemplating it with thoughtful gaze. "Simon—what sort of an implement would have forced that desk of yours? A knife, for instance?"

"Yes, that would have done the trick. It could have been slipped under the top near the lock; a slight pressure would have done the rest."

"I like a lock that is a lock," sniffed Miss Ocky.

"A matter of taste, I suppose. Bates, you know that Persian dagger of mine I've been using here lately for a paper-cutter? When did you see it last?"

"This evening, Miss Ocky."

"Sure?"

"Yes, Miss Ocky. I was straightening up in here just after you went to your room the first time, and I knocked the book you had been reading on to the floor. When I picked it up, the dagger fell out. I knew I'd lost your place and was sorry, but I couldn't do anything to find it again so I just laid the dagger down beside the book—right here." He indicated a perfectly blank spot on the table and looked mystified.

"I came down for the book just before one o'clock—couldn't seem to get to sleep," explained Miss Ocky musingly. "The dagger was not here then—but it didn't occur to me to raise the house about it. I took it for granted there was some simple reason for its being gone, and I didn't stop to look for it, as I was only striking matches to find what I wanted." She made a face. "For all I know, the burglar was right in this room at that very minute!"

"Pity you didn't run on to him," grunted Simon. "What are you suggesting, anyway?"

"I think your burglar came in here and noticed the dagger—he probably had a flash—and decided it was just what he needed in his business! He opened the desk with it, and unless he dropped it around somewhere when he was finished with it, I guess *I've* been robbed, *too*."

"Huh. Wasn't valuable, was it?" asked Simon impatiently.

"Well, I don't care about losing it—thanks for your kind and sympathetic interest!" retorted his

sister-in-law tartly. "Thank you, Bates; that's all."

"Yes, Miss Ocky." The old man bowed. "Good night, sir," he said, for the third time that night.

"I'll be off, too," said Miss Ocky, moving toward the door, where she lingered for a parting shot. "If I were you, Simon, I'd either have my locks seen to or else have my more valuable possessions nailed down. Good morning!"

She was gone before he could think of an effective retort. He occupied himself briefly in dragging a heavy chair against the broken window, then put out the lamp and went into his study. Bed seemed to make no appeal, though there was a suggestion of weariness in the way he dropped into his chair before the desk. He was mentally tired.

Who had dealt him this latest blow—a shrewder one than he had confessed to Ocky. That notebook full of formulas, the results of a lifetime of experiment and research, would be worth more than a gold mine to a competitor. There were men in the business who would pay handsomely for the picking of Simon Varr's brain! But who had known that, and turned his knowledge to advantage by the crooked way of burglary?

Two names kept bobbing up in the back of his brain. Copley was one; Graham the other. Either might have done it, or they might have entered into an unholy partnership of crime. Both knew the value of the notebook, and both had seen it in his desk that evening. Where had they been since? He had not noticed either of them at the fire; had they been robbing his desk while they knew him safely absent?

No sentiment played any part in these cogitations. He measured the possibility of his son's guilt as coldly as if the young man had been a complete

stranger—or an ex-convict. Measured it, perhaps, unconsciously, by his own standards of behavior. He had done things in his time that would have made a self-respecting burglar blush.

There was a third possibility. The Monk. Simon tried to shake off that thought. There was no sense in it. Queer how anything like that masquerader's mischief-making could get under a sensible man's skin—dig its way into his brain until it became an obsession! Suppose he *had* set fire to the tannery—was that any reason to believe he had proceeded to further activities the same night? There was not a shred of proof connecting him with the burglary.

He yielded to the fascination that the scrap of brown paper was beginning to exercise over him and drew it from the pigeonhole. He opened it and let his eye travel over the illiterate text to the threat at the end that was already known to him by heart: "Take heed to thy ways and mend them, lest thou be destroyed by the thunderbolts of wrath!" Then he started violently in his chair, for he had come upon the very proof he had thought lacking.

Beneath the last line of the message a few words had been scrawled with a blunt, blue crayon and then deeply underscored for emphasis. He stared at them, his face flushing and paling by turns, his lips soundlessly shaping the ill-formed characters.

"Behold, the bolts are loosed!"

IX: Simon Seeks Advice

THE discovery that his unknown enemy after first firing the tannery had then rounded off a perfect evening by burglarizing his house threw Simon Varr into a state of mental confusion. Here was a saturnalia of crime condensed into the space of a few hours. And the man's audacity was no less bewildering than his swift efficiency! Who, in this hitherto quiet township of Hambleton, had suddenly developed a brand of vicious courage that nerved him to commit arson and burglary? Simon reviewed an imposing procession of possible suspects until his brain wearied, and his wits, seeking vainly for light, were hopelessly at fault in a fog of conjecture.

It was nearly three o'clock before he laid an aching head on his pillow, it was nearly five before sleep came to him, but he was up at his usual hour and downstairs in his study by eight. Physically he was still tired, but the brief spell of slumber had at least rested his brain and cleared it against the problems of a new day.

However undeserving he might be of sympathy, mere humanity would suggest that it would be pleasanter, far pleasanter, to record that this day of all days in Simon Varr's life was peaceful and calm, but the truth is exactly the reverse. It was destined to be a day of bitterness and strife, terminating in actual violence.

The trouble began with Jason Bolt.

Lucy Varr did not descend for breakfast, nor did Ocky, who elected to depart from custom and have a

tray brought up by Janet to her bedroom balcony. Simon ate his usual hearty meal with more deliberation than appetite, and had barely returned to his desk when he heard the squeal of brakes that distinguished Jason's car from its numerous fellows.

He came straight back to the study and threw himself into a chair, his round, good-humored face unwontedly grave.

"Well, Simon, here's a pretty kettle of fish!"

"There are several kettles of fish. Which do you mean?"

"Well—Billy Graham's, to commence with. He was around to see me an hour ago—"

"Was he sober?"

"Of course he was; don't be too unjust, Simon! Graham doesn't make a practice of drinking, and if he took one or two too many last evening, as he admits he did, I for one don't blame him. That confounded pup Langhorn told him what he overheard—"

"I know— I know all that. I have fired Langhorn and I have fired Graham." Simon's jaw tilted truculently. "What about it?"

"That's what I've come to ask. What about it? If you keep on at this rate, another week will see you down to bed-rock—reduced to one partner and one idle tannery. And some one seems determined to burn *that* up piecemeal!"

"I didn't see you there last night."

"No, thank goodness, I was in blissful ignorance of our latest trouble. We have guests, you know. Mary and I took the Krechs to Barney's road house just to give them a taste of night-life in Hambleton. Mr. Krech and Barney spent the evening extemporizing cocktails—"

"I'm not interested in your orgies. What did Graham have to say this morning?"

"Nothing that wasn't mighty decent, all things considered. He is sorry to go after all these years, but he doesn't question your right to fire him. He prefers to discuss the details attendant on his quitting with me—you have no objection?—and he is writing to Rochester to tell the Thibault crowd he accepts their offer."

"That doesn't break my heart. The sooner he gets to Rochester the better pleased I'll be."

"Oh, yes—because of Copley, I suppose, and the girl. Well—I guess Billy Graham isn't in the market for sympathy. He tells me that he is fairly familiar with the Thibault tanneries from hearsay and he is confident that he is taking them some tips that will make him solid with them from the start."

"Eh? What's that?" Suddenly intent, Simon Varr leaned forward and fixed a sharp gaze on the speaker. "What is he taking them? What did he refer to?"

"Why—nothing specific, Simon! No doubt he has picked up a score of useful tips during the time he has been associated with us. We can't stop him from giving them the benefit of his experience; that's the sort of thing you must expect when you fire a good man without any reason except that he has a pretty daughter whom you can't keep your only son away from. I must say, Simon—"

"Must you? Please try not to!"

Jason complied with a shrug of his shoulders; why waste his breath on this human lump of obstinacy?

Varr relaxed in his chair again, thinking. He ran over the events of the previous night. Graham had

drunk at least enough to render him irresponsible for his impulses and actions. He had seen the notebook lying on the desk. Enough time had elapsed between his departure and the alarm of fire to have enabled him to slip down the hill and fire the tannery. He might then have returned and watched his opportunity to break into the house. Yes—it was possible, physically, for him to be the guilty man. “Taking something valuable to Thibault?” The notebook? Would he have the brazen nerve to make such a remark if he were the thief? Yes! If Graham were the man, that identified him with the masquerading monk, and *he* had nerve enough for anything!

It struck Simon—while his partner waited in glum silence—that it would be interesting to learn where Graham had been on the night before after leaving him in the study. To put it more bluntly—had the man an alibi? How did one go to work to learn such things, short of asking open questions? Varr shelved the problem temporarily, though an idea in the back of his head was slowly shaping itself into the answer. He would do nothing decisive until he had weighed things more carefully and was sure—

“How shall we replace Billy Graham?” said Jason Bolt, having fidgeted in silence to the limit of his patience. “Have you any one in mind?”

“Certainly I have!” snapped his partner, who had given not a thought to the matter until that moment. “D’you suppose I’d fire a man unless I saw my way free of that difficulty? There’s old Maple; let him take hold when he is hungry enough to come back to work.”

“Maple? A good, steady man, Simon, but not the

sort I'd pick. Not a scrap of initiative. He knows enough to do just what he's told to do, but—"

"That's the sort of man I want."

"And what you say goes! Don't trouble to point that out; I have heard it before. Do you mind, however, if I mention another man whom I've been thinking might fit in?"

"Well—who?"

"Copley. Your son. Don't look as if a snake had bit you! I think he would make up in intelligence anything he lacks in experience. He is quick to learn—"

"You may leave him out of your calculations."

Jason started at the tone of the remark, glanced at Varr's set face and shot at him an impulsive question.

"Simon! You haven't gone and quarreled with him *too*, have you?"

"Never mind that."

"By thunder, you *have*!" Jason Bolt regarded his partner open-mouthed. Then he added, half to himself: "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad!"

"What's that?" snapped Simon. The quotation had jarred on him, something in its phraseology savoring unpleasantly of the anonymous message he had received. "I'm a long way from being mad!"

"You can't prove it by me," said Jason rudely. He came to his feet. "I'll be getting back home; only blew in to talk with you about Billy." He hesitated before continuing. "By the way, Simon, are you going to be at the office this morning?"

"Very likely—yes, I shall. Why?"

"This chap who's staying with me—Herman Krech—very nice fellow—he's the broker I was

speaking of to you the other day. I thought I might bring him in and introduce him to you."

"Listen to me, Jason!" Varr's face was slowly flushing with anger. "We are *not* going to incorporate!"

"Oh—bless me, I'd practically abandoned that notion myself," said Mr. Bolt, airily mendacious. "Nothing was farther from my thoughts; I just thought I'd show him around and introduce him to you—let him see all the sights, huh? You may as well meet him; we're bound to be dining together either here or at my house as soon as our wives get their heads—"

"Bring him in by all means," interrupted Varr. The idea in the back of his head had suddenly burgeoned while his partner rambled on. "If either of you mentions the word incorporate I'll have you thrown out, but there is another matter in which he may be of service to me."

"Krech? Why, you don't even know him!"

"Well, you're going to fix that difficulty, aren't you?" Varr turned to his desk in his usual gesture of dismissal. "I'll be there at eleven."

True to his word, at a few minutes past ten Simon left home for the tannery. He would have a busy day, there, what with insurance data and other matters relative to the fire. The prospect fretted him—and it steeled his resolution to leave no stone unturned to bring the author of his troubles to book. Blast him! He'd learn that it was safer to monkey with a buzz-saw than with Simon Varr!

He stopped at the door of the office-building for a word with Nelson, who was already yawning at his post. Without any suggestion other than the prompt-

ings of good-nature, he had turned out long before daybreak to relieve the tired Fay.

"Mr. Bolt and another gentleman are in back, sir," he reported. "Just looking around. A young man was in about the insurance—said he'd be back later. Steiner was here, very curious about the fire, but I told him he'd have to see you."

"Right. You can tell Mr. Bolt that I'm upstairs. Did you or Fay look around any more in the neighborhood of those footprints?"

"Footprints? He said nothing to me—"

"True; I told him to keep his head shut. I will talk to you about that later, Nelson. There hasn't been any trouble from the strikers?"

"I haven't seen a soul, sir, but I've heard they are having a sort of a meeting this morning. There's been talk of appointing a committee to call on you and discuss things."

"There's nothing to discuss. However, I'm perfectly willing to meet a committee from them and tell them again that they'll gain nothing by their strike but trouble for themselves. You have to tell a fool the same thing over and over again before he'll believe it. Send 'em up when they come—but not more than three of 'em; I don't want a whole mob mucking up my office."

"Yes, sir. There's been a young woman askin' for you, too, sir. A girl named Drusilla Jones."

"Never heard of her." Simon, on the point of turning away, paused and looked curious. "What does she want?"

"She's been goin' around pretty steady with Charlie Maxon, sir. I guess she'll want to see you about lettin' him out."

"Humph. He's where he belongs, and I wouldn't

do anything to get him out even if I could. Tell her that, and say I won't see her. Make it clear, Nelson; I've no time to waste on Maxon's women."

"Yes, sir."

The watchman had nothing further to offer, and Varr went up to his office and busied himself with the morning mail. There were more indignant demands from aggrieved customers, and the fact that Simon had expected them did not lessen their power to annoy. His face grew steadily redder and redder as he worked through the pile of correspondence.

A clock in the outer office struck eleven, and as the last loud stroke thinned to silence there came the sound of heavy footsteps ascending the stairs. Jason Bolt believed in punctuality.

He entered with a cheerful greeting that suggested he had recovered some of his equanimity since his earlier talk with his partner. On his heels came his friend, a genial-looking, red-faced, smooth-shaven gentleman whose personal dimensions and displacement were such that they seemed to dwarf the small office to the proportions of a room in a doll's house. He stood well over six feet, was broad, deep-chested and bulky, but moved with a light-footed agility that argues muscle rather than fat. Simon was not a small man himself, but he felt like a pigmy as his hand disappeared into one that opened like a suitcase.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Varr," said the newcomer pleasantly, in a voice that was deep but agreeably pitched. "Bolt has been showing me the whole works, here. You have a fine proposition."

"I think so," concurred Simon with mild gruffness. "Jason is dissatisfied with it, but it suits me very well."

"So I have gathered from talking with him," said Mr. Krech, genially. "No doubt you are right—at any rate, I seldom try to advise other men in respect to their own business." He took a huge cigar-case from his pocket and opened it, then offered it to Varr and Jason Bolt. "No? You don't mind if I do, though?" He carefully lighted a mammoth cigar and sat down on a chair toward which Simon had waved. "I see that some one else is dissatisfied with the tannery, too. You must have had a narrow escape from being burned out last night."

"Ah, yes! We have had some little trouble with a number of malcontent employees. I am gradually weeding out the more noxious of them—eh, Jason?" Mr. Bolt palpably winced. "In fact, Mr. Krech, there have been developments in connection with that fire, and certain other occurrences, that put it in my mind to ask something of you."

"Bolt told me that you wanted to see me about something," said the big man heartily as the tanner paused to choose his words. "If I can be of service to you I'll be delighted."

"Thanks. It's really a very simple matter. You see, I have decided to have this fire—and those other occurrences—investigated, competently investigated, and their perpetrator punished to the full extent of the law. Unfortunately, the local police are utterly incompetent to handle a case of this kind, and I don't think much more of the County officials. It finally struck me that a private detective agency might do the trick. But I don't know any such concern and I don't feel like employing one blindly, so I thought I'd take advantage of your coming from New York and ask you to hunt up a responsible agency for me."

"A private detective!" exclaimed Jason Bolt. "Why, Simon, what has happened to require any such critter as that? What are those other occurrences you speak of?"

"I'll tell you—I'll tell you in good time. First, I want to hear if Mr. Krech is disposed to assist me. He has facilities in New York for locating a reputable agency, no doubt."

"I don't have to go to New York for that," answered the big man promptly. "You've come to the right place for information, Mr. Varr. I know a very capable chap." He turned to Jason, and added slowly: "We don't talk much about it, as you can imagine, but possibly you have heard that my wife's brother was murdered under rather curious circumstances; a cold-blooded crime if ever there was one."

"I've heard Mary speak of it," admitted Bolt.

"Well, the detective I have in mind is the man who cleared up that mystery." His gaze shifted back to Simon. "Of course, knowing him and getting him are two different things. He's usually up to his ears in one thing or another. If it's not too confidential, and you want to give me an idea of your problem, perhaps it would help me interest him. At least, if it is out of his line, he will recommend some one else who'll be competent to handle it for you."

The tanner gagged a bit over the idea of any private detective rejecting his patronage, but after all he wanted a good man and not the first Tom, Dick or Harry to offer his services so he gulped down the tart comment that had sprung to his lips.

"There's nothing confidential about it—short of its getting into the papers and giving my show away. I've got to tell Jason about it, and if you care to

listen I'll be glad of your opinion on the whole crazy business. It began with—"

He got no farther for the moment. There was a scuffling and shuffling of feet from the direction of the stairs, and Nelson appeared in advance of three rather ill-at-ease visitors. They were dressed in workmen's clothing and carried their caps respectfully in their hands.

"A committee from our strikers," explained Varr curtly to his partner. He stood up. "Don't bother, Jason; stay here with Mr. Krech while I talk to them in the outer room. It'll take me about two minutes to get rid of 'em!" he added grimly.

He strode from the room and met the approaching delegation halfway across the main office. From where they sat, Jason Bolt and his friend could watch the ensuing proceedings and hear every word that was spoken.

Varr was instantly wrathful at discovering in the gray-haired individual who turned out to be their spokesman an old employee whose name was Maple, the very man he had spoken of to Bolt as possibly replacing Graham as manager. He could almost hear Jason chuckling over the fact as he snapped a curt command at the fellow to state his business.

"We've come for a talk with you, Mr. Varr," began Maple soberly, "because there's some of us who feel that this strike has gone on too long as it is. It's bad for us, sir, and it must be bad for you and Mr. Bolt. We three have been appointed to call on you gentlemen and ask you to look into the whole situation with us. There's points on which we've been unreasonable, maybe, and there's others where we think you've been unreasonable. If we give in a bit and you give in a bit perhaps we can reach some

sort of a compromise that'll let us all go to work—"

"Stop! I've been waiting for that word compromise! You can go back and tell your crowd that this strike isn't going to be settled—it's going to be *broken!*" Varr smashed one fist into the other as he roared his defiance. "Go back and tell 'em! Tell 'em I'll watch every man of you starving in the gutters before I'll be driven into doing what I've said I won't do. Go set some more fires in the tannery; you'll soon find that'll get you nowhere but in jail!"

"We've set no fires, Mr. Varr," answered Maple with dignity. "On the contrary, sir, the three of us here now were amongst them who helped to put out the fire last night. You've no call to blackguard honest men. As for starving in the gutter, sir—"

He stopped speaking to reach in his pocket and draw out a few small bills, which he held up for Varr's inspection, and at a nod of his head, his two companions also produced money from their trousers. Simon glanced at it and sneered.

"Found a union to support you, eh?"

"No, sir, not that. To tell the truth, Mr. Varr, there don't seem to be any good reason to tell you where this came from, or how it came, but we feel in duty bound to say it brought with it a message for you."

"A message? For me?" Simon repeated the phrases quickly, his mind alert for new alarms. "Well, what was it? Get it out!"

"We were told to tell you that while we held out against you we could count on getting money for our needs from the 'Black Monk'."

"The Black Monk!" Simon fell back a pace as

he whispered the words. "The Black Monk! What—what do you mean?"

"That's all we can tell you, sir." Maple fumbled with his cap and coughed nervously. "We'll ask you again, sir, as in duty bound to our comrades, if you'll help us come to a compromise—"

"No!"

The committee shrank back from the explosive quality of the monosyllable that was like a door slammed in their faces.

"Very well, sir, then we'll wish you good day—and a kinder heart for your fellowmen."

"Stop!"

Sheer anger at this latest evidence of his enemy's activity had swept Simon Varr beyond self-control, beyond reasoning and beyond decency. He launched upon the stolid committee a rushing torrent of insult and invective. The veneer of dignity that had come to him with wealth and position slipped from him, as the old skin slips from a snake, and he went back to the vocabulary of his youth for terms sufficiently blasphemous and obscene to express his opinion of the strike, the strikers, the committee and its sponsors. He did not stop until his breath failed and left him panting.

The two men in the small office listened to that tirade in embarrassed silence. Jason Bolt fidgeted in his chair and grew pink to the tips of his ears. Herman Krech, as became a tactful bystander, gazed at the floor, stared at the ceiling, studied the glowing tip of his cigar, peered through the grimy window at the uninspiring view of Hambleton and generally comported himself with discretion and *savoir faire*. Inwardly, he was wondering if he had any right to inflict this termagant tanner on his unsuspecting

friend, the detective. Not by a jugful, unless the mutt had a mighty interesting case—

“I think,” said Simon Varr, reëntering his office, “I think I have now made my position clear to those fellows!” A grim satisfaction was apparent in his voice and bearing, the usual aftermath with him of an outburst of temper. “Now we can resume where we left off.”

“What was that stuff about a monk?” demanded Jason.

“That’s part of my story. When Mr. Krech has heard it, he will tell us if it is likely to interest his friend.” He sent a questioning glance at the big man. “By the way, what is his name?”

“Peter Creighton,” said Mr. Krech.

X: Creighton Takes the Case

JASON BOLT and Herman Krech listened to Varr's narrative in rapt silence. The former's interest was mixed with amazement, the latter's with enthusiasm. As the tale progressed the big man hitched farther and farther forward in his chair, his expression that of a little child who proposes to miss no syllable of a fascinating fairy story. He considered himself something of a connoisseur in crime, did Mr. Krech, thanks to a few experiences with his friend Creighton, and a subject that had always made an appeal to his imagination was now become the hobby of his every idle moment. Although he would not have abandoned a lucrative business to take a position on Creighton's staff of operatives, it was his secret grief that the detective had never recognized his ability to the extent of offering him one.

He was beaming with delight by the time Varr had ended his curt account of his tribulations, and his distaste of the tanner's personality had been temporarily forgotten.

"Gee Joseph, Mr. Varr!" he burst out. "You really ought to congratulate yourself! You've been the victim of the prettiest piece of persecution I've ever heard of!"

"Thanks," returned Simon without enthusiasm.

"He seems to be waltzing all around you and jabbing you just where it will hurt the most, and yet he's clever enough to evade capture and even to keep

you from guessing his identity. Why not make a list of your known enemies and check them off one by one?"

"Too many of 'em," retorted Simon briefly.

"Ah, yes—I should have thought of that!" A muffled snort from Jason marked his appreciation of the seemingly ingenuous jibe. "If a man's known by the enemies he makes, I should say this fellow was a lasting credit to you. You'll miss him when he's gone."

"I'll miss him with pleasure. But when is he going? D'you think this is a problem that will appeal to Mr. Creighton's critical taste?"

"It will have my hearty endorsement, anyway, when I submit it to him. He likes crooks with imagination, I know, and this bird has it. I wish you had brought along that note you got from him."

"I did." The tanner reached into his pocket and drew forth the message that he had found in the cleft stick. "I decided to fetch it as long as I intended to tell you the story."

Krech accepted the bit of brown paper, carefully taking it by the tip of one corner and opening it with a shake. He held it out for Jason to read, but drew it back from the other's outstretched hand.

"Naughty, naughty, mustn't touch!"

"Fingerprints?" grunted Varr skeptically.

"It's a possibility we must consider," insisted the big man firmly. "I don't believe there are any; sort of pity if there were."

"Pity, eh? What do you mean, pity?"

"It would cheapen our crook. I don't believe he's the lad to leave clues." He added calmly, "Hush, now, and let me read this carefully."

Simon gasped and hushed. He consoled himself

with the reflection that this human mastodon probably knew what it was about.

"Well, I'm hanged!" blurted Jason Bolt, when he had perused the missive. "What do you make of it, Krech?"

"Why, there are a number of curious features about it that leap to the eye," said Mr. Krech blandly. "I will call them to Creighton's attention, of course." He stepped to Varr's desk, helped himself to an unused envelope and inserted the note. "How many other people have touched this paper besides yourself, Mr. Varr?"

"Not a soul. I've shown it to no one."

"Oh, that's fine." He picked up a clean letterhead and held it out to the tanner. "Ink your thumbs and forefingers on that pad there and then press them on this." He waited until Simon had gruntingly obeyed. "Good. These will identify your marks on the message, and if there are any others they will be the sign manual of our crook."

"How can you be sure?" argued Jason. "It's obviously an old scrap of paper and a dozen people may have handled it before the crook got hold of it."

Mr. Krech regarded his friend with a look of dignified annoyance.

"There's always some one around to make difficulties," he said severely. "You're a fly on the wheel of progress."

"Excuse me for living," begged the fly meekly. Then he looked at his watch and exclaimed, "Hello. Our wives, Krech, our wives—! We're late for lunch already! Drop you anywhere, Simon?"

"I have my car." The tanner glanced at Krech. "You'll notify Creighton?"

"With pleasure. I'll keep these for him, too."

He placed the envelope containing the message and the fingerprints in his pocket, then moved to follow his friend, already on his way to the stairs. He paused at the door, however, and came back rather hesitatingly. "Say—just how did that couplet run?"

Simon made a wry face, but obligingly recited:

*"Who meets the monk when dusk is nigh
Within the fortnight he shall die."*

"Do you take that seriously?" asked the big man.

"Do you take me for a blasted fool?" snapped Simon irritably.

"Yes," said Mr. Krech simply. "Just the sort of blasted fool I would be in your place, or that nine out of ten men would be. Because the threat is directed at *you*, you scoff at it and ignore it."

"What are you getting at?"

"This: the fellow who wrote that note and does his stuff in a monk's costume has all the earmarks of a maniac. Maniacs are dangerous. If he has made use of this old local legend to further his purpose, he may go ahead with it to the bitter end—your bitter end! Until he is laid by the heels, why not play safe and stay home after dark?"

"Humph. I'm likely to, aren't I?" jeered Simon.

"No, you aren't, because, to use your own expression, you're 'a blasted fool,'" conceded Mr. Krech cheerfully. "Anyway, if you happen to get bumped off, don't come around haunting me on the score that I didn't warn you!" He smiled benignly. "Ta-ta!"

The tanner choked back an oath. For some time after the loud groaning of the stairs beneath his visitor's tread had died away, he sat at his desk and scratched his chin gently as he meditated. The strik-

ing of the clock in the outer office recalled him to more present matters. It was understood that if he did not return home by a certain hour in the middle of the day he would lunch downtown, and the hour was now past. On these occasions he usually walked to the Hambleton Hotel, the town's one hostelry, where he could regale himself on a couple of heavy sandwiches and a cup of doubtful coffee.

Thither he now betook himself, frowning on the way as he noted some condemnatory expressions on the faces of those he passed on the street. He knew that public opinion was antagonistic to him in the matter of the strike and his treatment of Maxon—the *Hambleton News* had run a nasty paragraph about the last—and the censure irritated, if it did not move him.

He had no sooner entered the dingy lobby of the hotel than his eye rested on his son, Copley, seated at a rickety writing table and industriously scribbling on a pad of cheap paper. Varr strode across to his side and addressed him curtly.

"What are you doing here?"

"Living here," returned the young man, glancing up but making no move to rise. He met his father's angry glare coolly. "More convenient to my job."

"Your job!" echoed Simon derisively. "What mental incompetent has employed *you*?"

"Barlow, the editor of the *News*. I'm a reporter now."

"Humph. Why?"

"For ready money, naturally, until I can get something good."

"Am I to understand you have left my roof?"

"Absolutely. Left it last night, and returned for clothes and a few personal belongings this morning.

You piled it on a bit thick last evening—too thick. I've quit."

"Saved me the trouble of throwing you out!" said Simon between his teeth. "What did you tell your mother?"

"The truth. I didn't intend to, but I found Aunt Ocky had overheard our little chat and had told her we'd had a holy row. Sorry."

"Blast your Aunt Ocky!"

That did not seem to call for a reply and Copley made none. After a few seconds of silence he raised his pencil suggestively.

"Speaking as a prominent citizen, Mr. Varr, what have you to say regarding the opening of the new sewer in State Street?"

"Nothing—except that I hope you'll fall into it!" said his father with asperity, and walked away.

Copley wrote an item on another sheet of paper. "Among those lunching at the Hambleton Hotel yesterday was Mr. Simon Varr, of the Varr-Bolt Tanneries. He did not tip the waiter." He cocked his head at a critical angle and contemplated the last six words before reluctantly obliterating them. Discretion must be his watchword, he told himself, and a job is better than a jest.

Simon finished his meal and returned to the office, noticing already the premonitory symptoms of the mild indigestion that habitually followed the greasy cooking of the hotel chef. He found his insurance man waiting for him and spent two tedious hours over an inventory and proofs of loss before he could rid himself of the fellow—and sped his going with a curse because the broker warned him the insurance company would certainly cancel their existing policies if they got wind of an incendiary.

That reminded Simon of the footprints in the tannery yard which he had wished to examine by daylight. He had intended to show them to that chap Krech, but Jason had spoiled things by hurrying him off to his silly lunch. He descended the stairs, called Nelson to join him, and went to the end of the fence around which the fire bug had fled.

He gave the watchman a brief account of Fay's experience at the commencement of the fire, when he had actually obtained a glimpse of the incendiary at his evil work. He discussed with Nelson, a shrewd man, the possible identity of the miscreant, but they arrived at no conclusion. Together they traced the footprints from the yard around the fence and up the muddy bank of the little stream until they vanished on the firmer ground outside the premises.

"Make anything of them?" asked Varr.

"Nothing more than you do, sir; they seem to be the tracks of a large man. That friend of Mr. Bolt's could have made 'em nicely."

"Get a couple of empty boxes," directed Simon, mindful of the protective device he had used in his kitchen garden to preserve the marks left by Charlie Maxon. "Cover up two good sets of these; they may come in handy later." He studied the skies. "We'll probably have rain before morning."

"Fay won't object to that," declared the watchman, grinning. "If he had his wish, it would rain chemical fire-extinguishing fluid!"

Simon lingered to see that the work of covering the tracks was properly done, and hoped that Mr. Krech and his detective would appreciate his thoughtfulness. Then he left the tannery, climbed into his car and drove home. The strain of the night before had told on even his iron physique—and there *was*

the mute appeal of a decanter of Bourbon that he knew would freshen his flagging spirit.

Jason's dilapidated little touring car greeted his gaze as he drove past the front of the house to the garage, and a sound of light voices came to him from the side veranda. Easy enough to guess the meaning of that; the Bolts had dropped in with their friends for tea and a chat with Lucy, who counted Mary Bolt her closest friend.

He joined them a moment later. Lucy, he saw at once, had been crying. No amount of powder or superficial gayety could conceal that fact from him. She did not look at him directly, and her voice was frigid as she introduced him to the one member of the party he had not met.

"Mrs. Krech—my husband."

Varr bowed to a tall, slender, strikingly handsome young woman with deep-blue eyes and a mass of dark red hair, who was seated beside his sister-in-law on a couch. The two were talking earnestly together until he interrupted them, as though they had taken an instant liking to each other.

"Excuse me if I don't get up," apologized Krech from the deep chair in which he was sitting. "I'm anchored."

The handsome Angora had found him, and as though to mark his approbation of another animal as fine as himself, had leaped into his lap and curled up contentedly beneath his caressing hand. Despite his words, Krech put him down and rose immediately when Simon indicated that he did not propose to join them. He followed the tanner into the house and accosted him in the hall.

"I'd like to see the window where that burglar got in last night," he said. "Got a minute to show me?"

"Very well. In this way." They went into the sitting room and Varr spoke on the way of his recent activities in the tanning yard, a piece of foresight that Krech instantly applauded. "This is the window; it was either pushed open by main force, or the catch was pressed back by some tool."

"The last is it," announced the big man promptly. "See here where the paint has been broken near the lock and the brass of the bolt is scratched? It's a cinch to open these things—a child could do it with a penknife."

"You have sharp eyes," admitted Varr grudgingly. "I hadn't noticed those scratches on the brass."

"Oh, I've helped Creighton on his cases any number of times, and of course a man soon gets the trick of observing the least thing out of the ordinary. Smaller marks than those scratches have hanged many a man, Mr. Varr."

"What a cheerful thought!" exclaimed a laughing voice behind them. They turned and found Mrs. Krech, with Miss Ocky at her elbow. "What are you two talking about hanging for? Herman, I came in to look for you; we're just leaving."

"All right, Jean; I was just giving Mr. Varr my celebrated imitation of an expert criminologist!" He did not proceed further until he had glanced questioningly at his host, who gave permission with a nod and a shrug. "Some one broke in here last night and staged a burglary; I didn't tell you before because I didn't know how far it was being kept secret."

"Can't keep secrets in this place," grunted Simon. "I gave up trying long ago."

"Have the police any idea who did it?"

"The police! My dear Mrs. Krech, it's evident that you don't know much about country constabu-

lary. I wasted no time telling them of my troubles. Your husband is going to place them in the hands of a friend of his."

"Peter Creighton! Is he coming here? Lovely!" She turned impulsively to Miss Ocky. "He's just the nicest man you ever met!"

"Who is he?" demanded Miss Ocky, but before she could get her answer, Varr had interrupted.

"We don't know yet that he is coming. You will surely write to him to-night, Mr. Krech?"

It was the very question the big man had been waiting for, but no one could have guessed it from his perfectly simulated surprise. His eyebrows were delicately arched as he made bland reply.

"You don't realize the value of time in these matters, Mr. Varr. Write to him! To-night! He'd have my life! No, sir, as soon as I left you this morning I went straight to the village and telephoned him. Bolt was fearfully annoyed about his lunch—he doesn't understand urgency, either."

"You got Creighton? What did he say?"

"He will handle it. He can't get here until the first train in the morning, but of course he is working on the case already."

"Working on the case?" repeated Simon impatiently. "How in thunder *can* he? He doesn't know anything about it yet."

"Oh, yes, he does. You forget that I was able to give him a lot of information. We had a long talk—ask Bolt."

"But, what can he do in New York?"

"Plenty," said the big man airily. "You don't know him."

"May I ask again," said Miss Ocky plaintively, "who is this Peter Creighton? And what?"

"He's a dear!" said Mrs. Krech.

"He's a wonder!" said her husband.

"He's a detective," said Simon grimly.

"A detective! Coming here!" cried Miss Ocky, her eyes bright with interest. "My word, won't *that* be jolly!"

XI: Checkers and Chicane

MISS DRUSILLA JONES, whose fortunes were temporarily bound up with those of Charlie Maxon, was a rather tall and shapely young woman, handsome in a coarse sort of way when her face was in a state of animation; in repose, its expression was marred by a too-great boldness in the big dark eyes and a suggestion of sullenness about the heavy, full-lipped mouth. She dressed well—"too well for an honest woman," was the dark verdict of ladies more reputable and less attractive—and, with a shrewdness surprising in one of her type, avoided the cheapening allure of cosmetics. She spent most of her days in bed, and earned her living, at least ostensibly, by spending most of the night at Tom Martin's dance hall, where she was kept on the payroll as an "entertainer." It was there she had first met Charlie Maxon.

In accordance with her promise to return at a later hour, she left her small house on the edge of the town shortly after four o'clock and turned her steps in the direction of the tannery, where she hoped to catch Simon Varr in his office. Her natural sullenness of expression was intensified as she walked slowly along her way, for certain friends of hers had pointed out to her that she was wasting her time. Simon could do nothing if he would, and would do less than that if he could, for the lover languishing in jail.

"Then I'll give him a piece of my mind!" she retorted. "I'm not afraid of old Varr nor any other man."

Her course led her through the heart of the town, and her exact social status could have been nicely determined by the glances of disfavor she received from certain thin-nosed, pursed-lipped matrons of Hambleton whom she passed en route. She could pretend to ignore these glances, and she did, but they aroused a fierce resentment in her breast and hardened a resolution already half formed—she was sick of this place, she was sick of these people, she was sick of her undue prominence in a small town where every one knew all about every one else, and she proposed to shake its dust from her high heels at the first opportunity that offered.

At the tannery, Nelson opened the door when he recognized her through the peephole and greeted her with a shake of the head.

"No use, Drusilla. He isn't here, and he wouldn't talk to you if he was. Said to tell you he'd no time to waste on Maxon's women."

"He did, did he!" flared the girl. "Then you can tell him for me that he's goin' to get into a peck of trouble if he don't look out!"

"I wouldn't say things like that if I was you, Drusilla," admonished the watchman. He had always liked the girl and regarded her with as much kindly tolerance as was fitting to a respectable family man. "There's talk around town already that your Charlie knows more about the fires we've had than he ought to."

"Sort of thing this town would say! How could he start a fire when he was locked up in jail? Answer me that."

"He's got friends, ain't he?"

"That's neither here nor there. You can take it from me, he don't know anything about those fires."

"You may be wrong, Drusilla; a man don't have to tell a woman all he knows. Anyway, it will be best for you and best for him if you keep your mouth shut." He looked around them cautiously. "I know what I'm talking about. Take my tip and watch your step."

"What do you mean?"

"Varr's sending to New York for a detective."

"A detective!" Miss Jones was startled, and made no effort to conceal the fact. "How do you know?"

"Mr. Bolt was here this morning with a friend of his from New York, and I heard them speakin' about it as they went out. So you tell Charlie Maxon to be a good little boy and put away his box of matches."

"He had nothing to do with those fires," reiterated Drusilla mechanically, her thoughts elsewhere. She had met country detectives and done business with them on terms satisfactory to both sides, and she held them consequently in contempt, but a detective from New York was an unknown and possibly ominous quantity. "When's he comin'?"

"Dunno. To-morrow, I'd say likely."

"Well, to-morrow's another day," remarked Drusilla easily, recovering something of her poise. "I guess he won't amount to so much! I'm obliged to you just the same for tipping me off. Drop in at Martin's one of these evenings and have one on me—he's serving a pretty good brand just now."

"Don't you try to vamp me, Drusilla," grinned Nelson. "I'm a decent married man."

Miss Jones tossed her head and strolled away.

She quickened her step presently as she decided on a course of action that appealed to her restless, rather adventurous nature. She had played with this same idea previously, but had lacked the animus

to put it through. Nelson, with his good-natured hint about a detective from the city, had supplied that.

She went straight to the dance hall, closed at this hour to its nocturnal patrons, where she knew she would find Tom Martin in the office back of the main room. He was there as she expected—a keen-eyed, sharp-featured little cockney whose history from the time he disappeared from London in a fog to the day when he emerged in this unlikely corner of the great United States would have made a thrilling story—particularly to the English police! Through the open door of his office he was keeping an eye on the activities of several waiters who were cleaning up the dance hall and straightening the small round tables where “only soft drinks” were served, and he looked up to welcome his visitor with a nod of surprised recognition.

“’Ello, Drusilla. Wotcher doin’ ’ere at this time o’ dye?”

Miss Jones had two wants and voiced them promptly.

“Give me a quart of rye, Tom, and a couple of knock-out drops.”

Mr. Martin jumped in his chair and shot a nervous glance at the men in the outer room. “The rye’s all right—you’ve got some wiges comin’ ter yer an’ I’ll take it out o’ them. But I don’t know nothin’ about them other things, Drusilla. Wot *are* they?”

“Don’t try the baby-innocent act on me, Tom! I want some knock-out drops, same’s you put in the beer of that drummer from the city last Tuesday night—and I mean to have ’em!”

Hers was a carrying voice, and she was speaking with fearful distinctness. A visible shudder ran

through Mr. Martin's slender frame as he sprang to his feet and hurriedly shut the door.

"All right, Drusilla, you can have 'em—but fer the luv o' Mike don't tell th' blinkin' world abaht it! Wotcher want 'em for?"

"What you don't know won't hurt you," responded the girl.

That gave him pause, but in the end she had her way after some cajolery and a few loud threats. She left the premises with a paper parcel in her hand and the wished-for pellets in her bag.

Her house was not far removed from the police station, in the rear of which was the small square building that served as a lockup for such casual unfortunates as were not of a quality to be sent to the county jail. Here Charlie Maxon was incarcerated, his quarters consisting of a small room with a grille door and a barred window too high for anything but light and ventilation. The only additional deterrent to his escape was to be found in the person of a nondescript elderly man who received a dollar a day from the town funds to act as jailer when the lockup was in use. His name was Moody, his chief characteristic the determined grouch he had cherished since the advent of prohibition.

He was seated on the stone steps of the jail, smoking a small but powerful pipe, when Drusilla Jones appeared from the direction of her house. She bore a basket in one hand, its contents scrupulously covered with a white napkin. It was about six o'clock.

"Good evening, Mr. Moody!"

"Hullo."

"I've brought a few things I've cooked myself for Charlie's dinner," she informed him. "Want to look 'em over?" She put down the basket and whipped

off the napkin, replacing it when the jailer had cast a gloomy eye over the contents and signified his satisfaction with a nod. "Come and unlock the door so I can give it to him, there's an old dear!"

The old dear arose grumbling and proceeded to obey, pulling the door key from his pocket. She followed him into the building, where their advent was hailed with joy by the prisoner, upon whose hands time was already beginning to hang heavy.

"That you, Drusilla? Say—that's fine! Twenty-five cents a day is the food allowance in this jail, and nineteen of that is grafted by some one before it turns into grub." He accepted the basket from Moody, who promptly relocked the door of the cell. "Get a chair, Drusilla, and we can talk while I polish off this dinner."

"No, you don't," corrected Moody. "What do you think this is—a hotel? You can have five minutes, young woman, an' then out you go!"

He went back to his doorstep and resumed his pipe. He might or might not be within earshot; Drusilla could not determine which and she dared not take chances. Fortunately she had guarded against such a contretemps as this by providing a second line of communication, and after chatting loudly with her *vis-a-vis* through the bars of his cell she suddenly dropped her voice and whispered swiftly:

"Bottom of the basket. A note. Read it!"

He registered his perfect comprehension by an eloquent wink the while he discoursed long and loudly upon more innocent topics. They exchanged sally and quip through the forbidding grille until a warning grumble from the doorstep marked the expiration of the five minutes and the end of their interview.

"Night, Charlie. See you again soon!"

"Night, Drusilla—and thanks. If you run into old Varr, give him a bust on the head for me!"

"Hush, Charlie—you shouldn't talk that way! Should he, Mr. Moody?" she added brightly to Cerberus as she passed him. "I'm always telling him he talks too much and doesn't mean half what he says."

"Every one talks too much except me," declared the disappointed disciple of Bacchus. "I only talk when I'm drinkin', and I haven't said a word for months and I haven't been what you might call loquacious for some years."

"Charlie knows where to get liquor," suggested Drusilla, quick to sieze this happy opportunity to titivate the jailer's thirst. "Make him get *you* some!"

"On your way!" said Mr. Moody virtuously—but thoughtfully.

Charlie Maxon, hearing their voices and sure that he was unobserved, delved rapidly into the bottom of the basket at some cost to a custard pie that recklessly intervened. He discovered a quart of rye which he promptly thrust into concealment beneath the single blanket on his narrow cot, a half dozen excellent cigars that he stored in a pocket of his vest, and an envelope that contained two white pellets and a hastily-written note.

The latter he carried nearer to the window and read its contents hurriedly; a soundless whistle relieved his emotions when he had finished its perusal. He was briefly pensive.

"Well—why not?" he demanded of himself finally. "She's not such a bad looker—and she's sure got a brain!"

He secreted the letter inside his shirt, proposing

to destroy it at the first opportunity, then settled himself to the tranquil enjoyment of Drusilla's dainties quite as if no weightier matter than her pastry portended. A hearty eater always, he did not desist until the last fragment of the damaged pie concluded his repast. Then he went to the door of his cell, stuck his head between the bars and hailed the seated figure of his personal attendant.

"Wotcher want?" asked Moody, grudgingly coming to his call.

"Thought you might like a cigar," explained his prisoner, poking one through the grille. "Smoke 'em, don't you?"

"When I c'n get 'em," admitted the jailer, and regarded this one with the dark suspicion of a man who has been the victim of practical jokes before. "What's the matter with it?"

"Nothin'. Smoke up! Gimme a match, will you?"

"You ain't supposed to smoke in your cell," objected Moody, but produced the match and lighted both their cigars. "However, I guess you won't tell the Chief of Police if I don't!"

"No fear. You're a good sport, Moody. I always knew that."

"Fine cigar," commented the jailer critically.

"Leave it to Drusilla. You can bet she helped herself from the best box Tom Martin has."

"Women are useful when they provide a man with good tobacco, but in other ways they can get you into a mortal lot of trouble. Take it from me, Charlie, and steer clear of 'em."

"I guess you know your way around, eh, Moody?"

"You can tie to that. Frinstance, if you knew as much as me you never would've got into this jail."

"I expect you're right. You've got a head on your shoulders!"

"Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody some good," reflected the jailer complacently. "I'm gettin' a dollar a day because you coveted your neighbor's tomatoes and then had no more sense than to shy one at him. Missed him, too, they tell me."

"I won't miss him another time if I get a shot at him, whether it's with a tomato or something else!" snapped Maxon with sudden viciousness. "I'd like to pitch him into one of his own vats!"

"You don't love him much, eh?"

Charlie Maxon thereupon expressed his exact opinion of his late employer in studied terms to which Mr. Moody lent the attentive and appreciative ear of a connoisseur in language. When the recitation was ended, he nodded approval and returned to his doorstep, where he sat down and contentedly finished his cigar.

Maxon dropped on his cot, eased the cork from the bottle of rye and took one satisfying drink of the invigorating liquor. More, he dared not allow himself for the moment.

At nine o'clock Moody rose from his doorstep and came inside, carefully locking and double-locking the door and putting its key in his pocket. He did the same by the rear exit, and was preparing to retire to the privacy of his own small room when he was hailed a second time by his charge.

"Now, what?" Moody went to the barred door of the cell with more alacrity on this occasion, hopeful of further largesse. "Can't you let a man have a minute's peace?"

"Going to bed so soon?"

"Nothin' else to do."

"Remember two years ago how we used to play checkers at the Workmen's Club?"

"What of it?"

"You used to beat me then pretty regular, but I guess it'd be different now. I'd beat you four out of five."

"That's nonsense. What are you gettin' at anyway?"

"What's the matter with letting me out of here for a while? A few games of checkers wouldn't do any harm—help pass the time."

"Help pass—! Say, where do you think you are? Why don't you ask me to take you to the movies? Mebbe you'd like me to send for Drusilla so's we could have a dance? Want me to lose my job, huh?"

"Who's going to know anything about it except us? Slip out and get a board—and a couple of glasses!"

"Glasses? What kind of glasses?"

"Whisky glasses."

Moody started. He looked keenly at his prisoner. Slowly, a warm light stole into his eye; he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Quit your kiddin'!"

"I'm not kidding—look here!"

Maxon knew his man. Satisfied that he had Moody quivering with anticipation, he stepped to his cot, produced the flat bottle and shook it invitingly. The rich gurgle was music to the jailer's ear. A more hard-boiled, professional warder would have followed just one course with decision and dispatch; to Moody's credit be it said, it did not once occur to him that he might safely confiscate the treasure and dedicate it to his own delight.

"I'll go after those glasses," he said promptly. "Sure it's good stuff, Charlie?"

"Wouldn't drink it myself if I wasn't, would I? Hustle up—I'm ready for a drink right now."

Tempted beyond his strength, the faithless keeper of the Hambleton lockup departed on winged feet. He was back in remarkably quick time, a checkerboard under his coat and two bar glasses in his pockets. A last feeble flicker of responsibility stayed his hand an instant as he opened the cell door.

"No tricks, Charlie!"

"'Course not. Cross my heart and hope to die."

With the doors locked and no windows through which they could be seen, they sat themselves confidently at a small table, a glass at each side, the checkerboard between them and the precious bottle on the floor within easy reach. The proceedings opened with one apiece.

"A-a-a-ah!"

"Told you it was good, didn't I? Have another."

"Thanks. This is like old times. Black moves first."

"Teach your grandmother. Chin-chin."

"If that's bootleg, it's good enough for me."

"It ain't, though. He gets it from Canada himself."

"An empty glass is a mournful sight. Thanks. Your move."

They played and drank and drank and played. Moody won most of the games, which suited both of them. An hour passed. There was lots of time, Charlie told himself. He wasn't due at Drusilla's until eleven-thirty—the rendezvous she had made in the event that all went well. On the other hand, he was beginning to feel the effect of the whisky he

was drinking. It wouldn't do to get tight himself. Better speed things up a bit, then take a walk for half an hour or so before going to Drusilla's—

"Em-py glash—mournful shight."

Charlie's left hand hovered an instant over the mournful sight, his fingers crumbling something; then he picked up the glass and filled it.

"A-a-a-ah."

Five minutes later he was half-carrying, half-dragging the inert figure of his jailer to the cell which by rights he should have been occupying himself. He dropped Moody on the narrow cot, relieved him of his keys and stepped out, grinning as he locked the door behind him. It would be a long, long time before the recreant warder awakened to discovery and disgrace. No one from outside would come near the place until eight or nine in the morning; he had oceans of time in which to make good his escape before the alarm could be given.

He possessed himself of a slouch hat that he found in Moody's room and drew its brim well down over his eyes, then cautiously unlocked the back door of the jail. This gave on to a narrow, unlighted alley, which led to a quiet side-street. There was little chance of his meeting any one at that hour of the night. After a quick survey which assured him the alley was deserted, he left the building and locked the door.

The fresh night air after the stuffy atmosphere of the jail hit him hard. It sent the potent fumes of the whisky to his head, and by the time he had reached the end of the alley he was staggering perceptibly. He vaguely realized his condition and the peril it implied, and paused for an instant at the first corner to steady himself against the wall of a build-

ing while he strove to clear his brain. He jerked off his hat to give the air access to his head, too fuddled to note that a street-lamp not ten yards away was shining directly on his face.

Then a tight grip fastened on his arm and he was pushed back into the obscurity of the alley.

"Charlie Maxon, by glory! Who let *you* out?"

"Wh-who are you?"

"Who am I? Well, that's pretty good! Mean to say you can't *see* me? I'm Langhorn!"

XII: Starlight on Steel

WHEN he had finished his examination of the broken window in the living-room, Herman Krech contrived—partly by his sheer physical bulk and partly by the exercise of a soft assertiveness that was saved by his bland geniality from being plain rudeness—to sequester Simon Varr for a word in private. To accomplish this end he was obliged to shake off his own wife, the tanner's wife, the Jason Bolts and Miss Ocky Copley, the last lady in especial revealing the pertinacity of a cockle-burr in her objection to being shaken off. Krech didn't succeed in losing her until he had shut the door of the study in her face with a courteously affected air of absent-mindedness.

"What do you want?" inquired Varr ungraciously.

"I've got a message for you—sorry if I'm intruding," replied the big man, half-amused and half-resentful at his host's tone. "I'm afraid it will annoy you—but most things do, don't they? But Creighton thought it best to give you a tip and of course I feel obliged to pass it on as received."

"All right. What is it?" said the tanner less irascibly.

"Practically a repetition of the warning I gave you this morning on my own account. I read him that note over the telephone. He said it sounded like the work of a nut, and added that a bad nut is often a dangerous proposition. He thinks you should take reasonable precautions against a personal attack at least until he gets here."

"When peace will mantle the earth, I suppose!"

"Possibly so," answered the big man imper-

turbably. "I know if I were a crook engaged in a campaign of crime I'd be apt to desist if a detective suddenly appeared over the horizon. Wouldn't you?"

"Not if I thought he was scared of me!"

"Oh—I see." Mr. Krech's face, normally pink, deepened to a delicate shade of rose. "Rather cheap, that, isn't it, Varr? No, Creighton is not scared of crooks so you could notice it, but he's not a darn' fool either. Anyway, there it is. Take it or leave it."

"I'll leave it, thank you. Does he think I'm going to wire the Governor to turn out the militia?"

"He'd be more likely to suggest that you wire the nearest asylum for a competent keeper; he has a rough tongue at times."

"Humph. When's he coming?"

"First train in the morning. Get's here at eleven."

"I'll drive down and meet him. Will he stop at the hotel, or will he expect me to put him up here?"

"You'd better settle that with him, Mr. Varr. He's not a roughneck, if that's what you mean." Krech contemplated the tanner reflectively; there were several things he wished to tell him but he manfully swallowed them all. "Good-day, sir!"

His doubts of the morning were reborn as he left the study, unattended. Had he any right to inflict this specimen on Creighton? He could only hope that the detective's sense of humor would prove a buffer between him and his patron's boorishness. If not—

His cogitations ended abruptly as he spied Miss Ocky awaiting him in the living-room. He had caught her with her eye so attentively fixed on the

study door as to suggest that a less refined woman might have had an ear glued to the keyhole. He beamed on her, his customary good-nature again in the ascendant as he left the irritating tanner behind.

"Hello," he greeted her cheerfully. "Others all waiting for me outside?"

"Yes. Your wife has apologized for you twice, I believe. I think it was mean of you to shut yourself up like that after getting me all excited about detectives and things! What were you two talking about?"

"Secrets," chuckled Mr. Krech. He continued to move implacably toward the front door as she marched with equal determination at his elbow. "Just a girly-girly heart-to-heart talk. Delightful fellow, isn't he?"

"Humph. You might remember he wasn't the only victim of the robbery. If he lost a notebook, I lost a perfectly good dagger. Why can't I know what's going on, too?" She cooed softly. "Please, Mr. Krech!"

"Well, if you *must* know! I asked him, 'Vot iss a tanner?' and he said, 'Vat do you mean?', and then—"

"Oh!" cried Miss Ocky, and flounced. Then her indignation gave way to laughter. "Mr. Krech, you're a—a *sus domesticus*!"

"French for diplomat, I take it," he retorted amiably, and left her on the top step as he surged across the piazza and down to the waiting car. Nevertheless, he sought his more erudite spouse at the first opportunity.

"Jean, what's a *sus domesticus*?"

"Gracious!" She wrinkled her beautiful brow for a moment, but she had taught school for a while

before acquiring wedded affluence and the answer presently came to her. "Why—a common pig, I suppose."

"Gosh. A *common* pig? Not even a nice, clean, pink-and-white, prize-winning pig?"

"No. What *are* you talking about?"

"Nothing. Nothing *a-tall*! Say—what did you think of that Copley woman?"

"Miss Copley? Very interesting. Very attractive. I liked her immensely. Didn't you?"

He thought that over an instant. Then, like Miss Ocky, he surrendered to amusement and gave one of his deep chuckles.

"Yes," he said. "I did. Sometime I'd like to pack a dictionary with me and drop in on her for a chat!"

After Krech had dropped his unwelcome warning and departed, Simon Varr turned to his desk and tried to forget some of his immediate problems by attacking a small mass of correspondence that he had brought home from the office after the innumerable interruptions of the morning. He did not succeed any too well in concentrating his thoughts on the task. They would persist in wandering to other matters, leaving him staring blankly at a letter while his wits went the weary round of his perplexities. With reflection came temper, and he rather welcomed the sound of his study door being opened with no preliminary knock. That foreboded more trouble of some sort, and he was in the humor for a fight— He swung his chair around and started at the sight of his wife in the doorway.

"Well? Come in. What is it?"

She accepted the invitation. She came into the room slowly, but she ignored his gesture toward a

chair. She stood looking down at him, her face all the whiter for a touch of vivid color that burned in each cheek, her arms hanging loosely at her sides but her hands clenched in token of restrained emotion. Her voice was calm as ever when she spoke, but passion lent it a husky quality that smote ominously on his ear.

"What have you done to—my son?"

"Done to him? Done to him? What d'you mean?" He sputtered. "I haven't *done* anything to him!"

"You quarreled with him?"

"Call it that if you choose. He forced the issue—though he probably went cry-babying to you with some other version!"

"He doesn't lie. And he told me just what I managed to drag out of him—no more. I got the impression that he was—ashamed of you, that's all."

"Well? I'll live it down, I guess! What do you expect me to do about it?"

"The decent thing, just for once in your life. I want you to go to him, or send for him, and—and make peace."

"You can see me doing it, can't you? Ha!"

"He has left our roof."

"His own choice!"

"You drove him to it."

"That's not so! He's free, white and twenty-one; he can do as he pleases elsewhere, but he'll do as I say while he's in my house!"

"My house, please!"

"We've had that argument before and you've had precious little change out of it! As for Copley—let him rustle his own living or starve until he learns to obey my wishes!"

"You won't consider mine?"

"No!" The word was like a thunderclap.

"Very well." She held herself erect to every inch of her slim height, her steadfast gaze leveled at him from beneath straight brows. "I warn you, Simon, that you are going too far. I don't know if you realize all the brutalities, the ignominies, that I've suffered from you since we were married. Much kinder if you'd beaten me. It hasn't seemed possible to me that you *can* have realized—! Yours is a very curious nature—I've had to make allowances—often—" Her voice faded into silence.

"*What are you going to do about it?*"

She jumped beneath the lash of that crisp question.

"I don't know—*yet*." Abruptly, she turned on her heel and left the room.

"That's that!" Simon swung back to his desk, a grim smile on his lips. "It always boils down to the same thing—they don't know what they're going to do about it. Let 'em rant all they please, in the end what I say *goes*!"

He resumed his correspondence, refreshed.

The only aftermath of this latest squall instantly apparent was the message Bates gave him as he announced dinner. Miss Lucy would not be down. She was indisposed.

"Another word for a bad disposition," Simon informed his sister-in-law, as they seated themselves at a table laid for two, indifferent to the fact that he was criticizing his wife within the hearing of a servant. "She'll have recovered by morning."

"We can't all have your sunny nature, Simon."

"Humph. You've heard about the roekus with Copley, I suppose?"

"Rumors have reached me." Miss Ocky peppered her soup composedly. "Need we discuss it now?"

"No. There's always the weather, if you prefer that."

The topic did not seem to appeal to her. They did not talk about the weather, nor anything else. A silence that would have been perfect but for the sound of a subdued champing from the head of the table was broken only once during the progress of the meal. Occupied though he was with his food, Varr gradually became conscious of a steady scrutiny that first puzzled, then irritated him. He glared at her angrily.

"What do you keep looking at me like that for?" he demanded.

"Interest, Simon. Pure, unadulterated interest."

"Well, stop it! I don't like it!"

For a wonder, she acceded to his insistence without a word. It cost her no effort to avoid looking at him for the remainder of the time at the table, after which they rose in silence and parted. Simon went inevitably to his study, Miss Ocky in sisterly fashion to Lucy's room to inquire the cause of her *malaise*.

Two hours passed before she came down again. Two somewhat trying hours, to judge from the expression on her face, which wore a look as grim as any ever sported by Medusa. Her eyes were cold and hard as she marched promptly to the closed study door and rapped upon it—a gesture of icy politeness.

"Come in! Humph. So it's you, Ocky! Dropped in to take another good look at me?"

"No—to have a rather serious talk with you,

Simon." From the effortless way in which she drew a heavy armchair into the position she desired, a shrewd observer might have gleaned a hint of the muscular strength that was her heritage from many a camp and trail. "Hope you don't mind."

"Quite the contrary. By a serious talk I presume you mean a row. Well—I've gotten so I thrive on 'em!"

"Yes. I pity you just enough, Simon, to wish you weren't so fond of them." Miss Ocky dropped into her chair and lighted a cigarette with pensive deliberation. "I don't know that I can offer you a real row; my idea was to hand you a few straight-from-the-shoulder remarks and then a couple of ultimatums. As for the brutal badinage in which you delight, I'm in no mood for it this evening."

"Let's have your remarks. I guess I can stand 'em."

"First, then— I suppose you know that you have played the cat-and-banjo with Lucy's happiness for the last twenty-odd years?"

"Don't assume I know anything. Just tell me!"

"Consider yourself told that, to start with. I was literally shocked when I came back and saw the change in Lucy. She's the shadow of her old self, nothing more. It is you who are responsible for that."

"Humph!"

"Now you have started on Copley—made a good start, too, if the boy's manner is any criterion. Possibly I may be doing him an injustice. It might have been consideration for his mother rather than fear of you that has restrained him until now. Anyway, I'm glad he has summoned the courage to defy you at last."

"Indeed. May I ask you one question? How long has it been considered good form for a woman to enter a man's house and interfere with his domestic relations. Eh?"

"It was my father's house first, then Lucy's. I am more at home here this minute than you could ever be."

"Try and prove it in a law-court!"

"Perhaps I shall—some day." She paused to scrutinize her polished finger-nails, brushed a speck from one of them, raised her eyes to his and added dryly, "After all, Simon, you know you only got in here by a trick."

"A *trick*! Now—what do you mean by *that*?"

"Memory gone *phut*, Simon? Perhaps I can refresh it. While I was watching the fire last night a man came up to me and called me by name. It was—Leslie Sherwood."

"*Ah!*" The exclamation was wrung from him through stiff lips. The color drained from his face as he leaned forward tensely, one hand gripping an arm of his chair like a vise. "G-go on!"

"That shot went home, did it?" asked Miss Ocky coolly, watching the effect of her words. "I've several more in the locker! We had quite a long talk together and he told me many things I didn't know. Interesting things—very!"

"*What?*" Simon's voice was hoarse. "He didn't tell you—he didn't dare tell you—" He stopped, a deadly fear in his eyes.

"Yes. He told me why he quarreled with his father. Why he left home. Why he has come back now, freed by his father's death. Shall I go on, Simon?"

He sank back in his chair, shaken in all his being.

He could not speak until he moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Have you—told Lucy?"

"No. That is Leslie's right, I should say. No doubt he will use it. As far as I can see, there is only one way by which you can make a decent exit from the mess you're in."

"If—if you're suggesting—suicide—forget it!"

"Suicide? No! Why should I waste my breath proposing an act that requires courage? What I meant was—divorce."

"Divorce!"

"It needn't cost you a penny. Make it easy for her to get—your lawyers will arrange that. You'll have the tannery—and welcome! All you need do is—go! Go from this house!"

"Divorce! Stand aside—hat in hand—bow another man into my place—!" The rage of a cornered animal swept aside his fear. "I'll see you all in—"

"Don't shout."

"So *that* is why Sherwood has come back!" He gritted his words through set teeth. "He thinks he is going to make trouble for me, eh? Just let him try—just let him try! If he dares to say a word to Lucy—if he even dares to set foot on this property—" His clenched fist crashed on the desk beside him as he abandoned himself to a very ecstasy of fury. "If he dares try that, by Heaven, I'll kill him like a dog!"

"I wouldn't," advised Miss Ocky in her quiet, hard little voice. "Everything would have to come out in court, then, and you'd have a fearful time persuading any jury that it was justifiable." She had finished her cigarette, and since Simon's study

boasted no ash-trays, she rose and went to the open window to toss the stub outside. She remained there, leaning against the casement and breathing deep of the cool night air. "Wouldn't you rather be divorced than hanged?"

"No!"

"Humph. Queer tastes, you have! Well—I've kept my promise. I've told you a few straight facts and issued an ultimatum. The rest is up to you. Would you like time to consider—"

"No! Not a minute—blast you!"

"I don't blast easily, Simon. I'm to assume, then, that you reject my well-intentioned—*Hello! What's that!*" Her voice dropped to an excited whisper as she bent her head and peered into the darkness.

The alteration in her manner penetrated through the fog of temper that had clouded his brain. He left his chair and was at her side in a bound, surmising her answer even before he snapped a swift question.

"What is it?"

"That monk—! I could have sworn—! Over there by the big silver birch—! I can't see him now. Can you make out anything?"

Side by side they leaned from the window, striving to accustom their eyes to the starlit night. A long minute passed.

"I must have been mistaken." Miss Ocky drew a long breath. "A shadow from a swaying bough—or imagination."

"There isn't wind enough to sway a twig!" he corrected curtly. He lingered a while longer, his angry gaze continuing to search the darkness, before he drew back into the room. "It's quite likely you saw him," he muttered. "No doubt he saw you, too, and heard you—and has slunk off with his tail between

his legs!" He half made to pull down the sash, then contemptuously refrained. "I'd like to get my hands on him!" His fingers curled longingly.

After a moment's hesitation, she accepted his dismissal of the subject. She stepped back and confronted him.

"To return, then—divorce, Simon?"

"Never!" He fairly barked it.

"I know of just one thing to your credit, Simon," said Miss Ocky rather sadly, rather dully. "You do mean what you say. I must accept your decision as—final."

"You must!" The interlude had braced him. "And—what are you going to do about it?"

She shrugged her shoulders, looked at him with expressionless eyes—turned and walked quickly from the room. His sharp, sardonic laugh followed her down the hall.

"Another false alarm!"

He threw himself into his chair, mopping his brow. Some ten minutes went by before a thought occurred to him that was fortuitously anticipated by the sudden appearance of the old butler.

"That decanter of Bourbon, Bates! Then go to bed."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

History repeated itself. He drank two glasses of the fiery liquor in swift succession. As he did so it rather staggered him to reflect that barely twenty-four hours had elapsed since he had stood there the night before, doing the same thing. Gad—what a day! Last night that monk had interrupted him—

That monk! He muttered the words. Had Ocky really seen him? Was he loose again on some fresh errand of crime? Had he been frightened away by

their appearance at the window? Had he been frightened away *permanently*?

On the spur of a swift impulse, born perhaps of the whisky, he reached up quickly and extinguished the solitary lamp. The room was instantly plunged into darkness, through which he groped his way cautiously as he set the stage for a game of cat-and-mouse. He pushed the chair that Ocky had used directly in front of the open window and settled himself in its depths, his hot eyes staring into the night and challenging it to yield its secrets.

He moved only once during the next half-hour. That was to pour himself another drink, which he sipped slowly while he continued to watch the neighborhood of the big birch that Ocky had indicated. Would he come back? Would he? Varr waited for the answer to that, waited and waited while a murderous rage filled his breast and grew ever more intense with each succeeding mouthful of raw drink. Would he come?

Yes!

The empty glass slipped from his fingers to fall with a light thud on the carpeted floor as he slowly rose from his seat. He rubbed his eyes, quite unnecessarily, for they were now used to the dim starlight. No possible doubt existed—the ominous black figure was *there!* Straight and tall, it stood, exactly as he remembered seeing it at the head of the trail. Now it was on a concrete path that bisected the kitchen garden, motionless, apparently inspecting the darkened house of the man it pursued.

Stealthy as a cat, nearly as swiftly, Simon rushed from his room and out of the house by the front door. His plan was to circle the building, taking advantage of every shadow, and get as close to his

enemy as he could before revealing himself. Suppose the fellow took alarm and got off to a running start? Could he hope to catch him? For the first time in his life, he wished he had a revolver.

Less than ten yards intervened between them when he finally broke cover and hurled himself furiously forward, hatred in his heart, a deep oath on his lips. At last! His fingers itched for the throat of his enemy.

It was disconcerting suddenly to realize that he had not taken his foe by surprise; his swift approach was slightly checked as he saw that the figure was facing him, watching him—waiting for him! It was still as any statue up to the very instant when he flung out his arms to seize it; then it fell back a pace and its left hand went slowly up to lift the black veil that masked its countenance.

If another emotion as strong as his hatred existed in Simon's breast, it was curiosity as to the identity of his relentless enemy. His advance came to an almost involuntary halt as he thrust his head forward the better to distinguish the features of that face so dimly visible in the uncertain light.

Then it was his turn to step back, his arms dropping to his sides, his brain reeling from the shock as it apprehended the truth.

"*You!*" he gasped chokingly. "*You!*"

In that moment he was helpless, defenseless, mentally and physically paralyzed from sheer amazement. It was the moment for which his crafty foe had played—and won. The figure darted forward, its right arm rose and fell. One flicker of starlight on metal, then the thud of steel driven home—

A single groan escaped the lips of Simon Varr before they were sealed in death.

XIII: A Deduction or Two

THE eleven o'clock train from New York was commendably punctual the next morning. Its brakes had barely ceased squealing on one side of the Hambleton platform when Miss Ocky brought her small car to a smart halt on the other. She sprang to the planking and waited for the passengers to alight, her face reflecting the cheerful knowledge that she was looking her very best that morning in a becoming hat and a well-fitting coat and skirt of gray English tweed.

Not many people alight at Hambleton on even the liveliest occasions, and this time a mere handful descended from the train. Among them was a middle-aged man in a dark-blue serge, a light overcoat on one arm and a heavy suitcase suspended from the other. He was compactly built without being too heavy, his smooth-shaven face wore an expression of good nature, and his eyes looked out on the world from behind tortoise-shell glasses with a friendly twinkle that concealed something of their sharpness. They had an inquiring expression now as he glanced about him.

Miss Ocky did not have to be much of a detective herself to know that here was her search concluded, though no one in the world could have measured up less to her expectations. She had visualized something with large feet, a big mustache and a heavy jowl, that would descend from a smoker with a dead cigar gripped between its teeth. Silly of her, she admitted to herself as she walked over and accosted him briskly.

"Mr. Creighton, isn't it? Knew it must be. I'm Miss Copley, and if I hadn't come down for you I don't know who would!"

"Very good of you, Miss Copley." He looked not unnaturally mystified by her greeting. "I was rather expecting a friend of mine—"

"Mr. Krech? He couldn't get away from the police."

"The police!" He was startled at first, then the twinkle in his eye deepened. "Don't tell me that his sins have found him out at last!"

"I have to tell you something much more serious than that," she answered soberly. "Come along and stick that bag in the car. We can talk while I drive you to the house. To begin with, Simon Varr was found in his kitchen garden this morning—stabbed to the heart."

Peter Creighton had a fashion of receiving such bits of news in a little silence that gave him time to gather his wits. Miss Ocky saw that the good humor was gone from his face which was now grave and stern. He did not speak until he had deposited his bag in the tonneau of the car and seated himself at her side in the front.

"Murdered," he said; it was not a question.

"The doctor says the blow could not have been self-inflicted." She touched the starter and turned the car homeward. "Yes—murdered."

"That is terrible, Miss Copley. I feel deeply shocked. Has the murderer been identified?"

"I can't say positively. He was found about six o'clock this morning by the cook, and you can imagine that we have been simply inundated with police and officials ever since. They've been doing a lot of whispering and conferring and I think they *do* sus-

pect some one, but of course they haven't confided in me."

"Excuse me, Miss Copley—just who *are* you? I gather you are a member of the Varr household."

"He was my brother-in-law. He married my sister. I've been visiting them about two months."

"I see. Thank you. Now—what about Krech and the police?"

"Well, they notified Jason Bolt—he was Simon's partner—and he came right over, bringing Mr. Krech, who is staying with him. There was a lot of talk about a mysterious monk—I know something about him, too!—and just when it was time to go to the train, Mr. Norvallis was questioning your friend in the living-room. So I slipped away and came to your rescue. It's as well I did—there are no taxis in Hambleton!"

"It was very good of you to remember me, with so much else to think about. You—er—how did you know I was expected?"

"Mr. Varr told us yesterday that Mr. Krech was sending for you."

"Us?" He turned to look at her while she answered. "How many people knew that I was coming, do you suppose?"

"Oh—several, anyway! Why?"

"I'm wondering if the news could have reached the ears of the murderer," he explained. "Some one was persecuting Mr. Varr, we know that. If he suddenly learned that a detective was coming—you see?"

"He might have thought it better to—to strike while the striking was good? Yes, I see." She took her eyes from the road long enough to give him

a quick look. "You think of things very quickly, Mr. Creighton!"

"Practice makes perfect," he murmured. "Who is Norvallis?"

"Assistant County Attorney, or something like that. Murders are rather too complicated to be handled by the local police, evidently."

"Yes, the County takes hold usually—sometimes the State, if the County can't make the grade. You spoke of a doctor—was that the County Physician? Has the body been moved yet?"

"Yes—thank goodness! I wasn't a great admirer of Simon's, but it wasn't nice to think of him lying out there in a tomato-patch! However, I suppose you're disappointed."

"Why? Oh, I see! You're assuming that I might be interested in the investigation. That doesn't seem likely. I came here on some matter of burglary—and quite possibly that has ceased to be of importance now. I must talk to Norvallis, though."

"If you investigate the robbery, you will be investigating the murder," said Miss Ocky quietly. "When Simon's notebook was stolen, his desk was forced open by a Persian dagger, belonging to me, that happened to be lying handy. That was missing with the notebook—and it was found again this morning in—in Simon!"

"Golly!" Creighton looked at her with renewed interest. "Not pleasant for you, that!"

"It seems to link the two crimes, doesn't it?"

"Decidedly. Here we are, I see."

A small crowd of curiosity-seekers was gathered at the gate which gave access to the driveway from the highroad, and a policeman in uniform was chatting with them amiably while barring their closer

approach. He saluted as Miss Ocky waved her hand to him and vigorously honked her way through the staring crowd.

"I'll drop this bag in the hall for the time being," said the detective as they mounted the piazza steps and entered the house. "Will you put me deeper in debt to you by finding Mr. Krech for me?"

She said she would, and departed on the errand while he lingered in the hall. The sight of no less than twelve automobiles of various sizes and sorts parked in front of the house had prepared him for a mob inside. A hum of voices reached him from a room on his left, the door of which was discreetly closed, and another hum came from one on the right, which he could see was a dining-room. Farther back in the hall, three solid-looking gentlemen had their gray heads together in a serious confab. For some reason they appeared to regard his entrance with considerable interest, and seemed to be discussing him while he waited. He put it down to the fact that he was a stranger where it was the custom for every one to know every one else. Then Herman Krech came out of some room in the rear and swept down upon him, accompanied by a short, stout, worried-looking individual.

"Hello, Creighton. This is Mr. Bolt, Mr. Varr's partner."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Bolt." Creighton barely acknowledged the introduction as he searched his friend's face. "Krech, how did this happen? I wouldn't have had it—"

"I know." The big man broke in quickly, earnestly. "I know what you are thinking. Forget it! It isn't your fault, nor mine. I warned him yesterday morning on my own account, and again in the

afternoon after I had talked with you. He simply disregarded it."

"A pity!" muttered the detective. His face had cleared somewhat at Krech's statement. "Thank goodness, I haven't got that negligence on my conscience! It has been worrying me ever since I heard the news. So he wouldn't listen to you?"

"Nary a bit. Let's go out on the piazza. There's a place around the corner that this merry throng hasn't discovered."

He led the way with his easy self-assurance and they followed at his heels. He was right about the privacy of the retreat to which he took them; a few men were standing around the front piazza, but no one had turned the corner.

"I'm glad to have a chance to speak to you, Mr. Bolt," said the detective when they had found seats. "This is a shockingly different state of affairs than I expected to find. What of the burglary that Mr. Varr had on his mind? Has that any importance now apart from its obvious connection with the crime?"

"Yes, indeed, great importance for me and a number of other people who may suffer from the theft of Simon's notebook." Jason looked ten years older than when he had risen that morning. "If that has gone it will be a serious blow to our tanning business—and a gold-mine to any competitor who might get his hands on it and not be honest enough to return it."

"Um. Secret formulas—that sort of thing?"

"Exactly. On my own behalf, and out of respect for my partner's wishes—his last wish, practically,—I would be very glad to have you take a hand in the affair and see if you can locate that notebook."

"The theft and the murder are linked by the dagger. If the police have their eye on the murderer, the notebook should be recovered when he is arrested."

"That's only a possibility, Mr. Creighton—and—oh, frankly, I want you to take the case anyway! Mr. Krech and I must try to tell you the whole story as we heard it from Simon yesterday. He was the victim of an unknown enemy. Threats—robbery—arson—murder! I won't be satisfied until that scoundrel is well and truly—*hanged*! As for the police—well, I think better of them than Simon, perhaps, but I'd still be glad of another string to my bow. It's proper for me to employ extra assistance if I wish, isn't it?"

"Perfectly. I quite understand how you feel—and I will be glad to do what I can. The family won't object, I suppose?"

"Not a scrap," said a woman's voice behind him. They started to their feet at the sight of Miss Ocky, who had come upon them unawares. "I can answer for the family. Please sit down again. I'll take this sofa—unless you're talking secrets," she added, with a faint smile for Herman Krech. "I tried to stay quiet in my room upstairs, but—nerves!" She lifted her shoulders and looked apologetic.

They assured her they had no secrets from her. She sat down and listened attentively as Jason Bolt, at Creighton's request, gave a careful account of the events preceding Varr's death as he had heard them from his partner, appealing to Krech from time to time for corroboration. His voice shook with emotion as he described his horror that morning when the news of Simon's fate was brought to him.

"A rotten business," he ended huskily.

Miss Ocky eased the tension by suddenly producing her cigarette case and passing it around; Creighton accepted one and lighted it, a thought surprised at this touch of outer-worldliness in a demure, middle-aged, country lady. It might be, he mused, that she called herself not an old maid, but a bachelor girl. He liked her, though; liked the bright eyes that lost nothing that passed, the alert brain that missed no trick, the strength of character revealed in the finely-modeled mouth and chin that were still invested with feminine charm.

"Let's tackle this business at once," he suggested. "Sooner the better. In a murder, look for the motive. Miss Copley—Mr. Bolt—can either of you tell me who might have wanted to kill Simon Varr?"

They looked uncomfortable. It was Krech who took the bull by the horns.

"*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*," he said gravely. "Otherwise, I should say that it would be simpler to give you a list of the people who didn't." He spared a regretful glance for Bolt's hurt little exclamation. "I know it jars on you just now, but truth is truth. I've seen enough in the last three days to know that Varr must have had a host of enemies."

"Yes," said Miss Ocky. "A notable collection."

"That won't do," objected the detective. "To dislike a man is one thing, to hate him to the point of murdering him is another."

"Greed is a motive for murder," said Krech. "Who stood to profit financially by his death?"

Jason Bolt stirred uneasily in his seat. Miss Ocky looked uncomfortable. Krech glanced from one to the other, then nodded to Creighton.

"It's the same answer," he said. "A lot of people."

"Neither the question nor answer are pertinent," commented the detective. "This murderer did not kill for money."

"Why are you so sure?" demanded Krech stubbornly.

"If he made up his mind that it would pay him to kill Simon Varr, he would have gone to work and done it out-of-hand, skillfully or clumsily as his limitations might permit. He wouldn't have wasted a lot of time with ineffective fires, bugaboo masquerading—and, above all, he never would have been so gracious as to send a warning note!" Creighton had the satisfaction of seeing his argument score a grand slam; there was conviction in the eyes of Krech and Jason Bolt, and something like admiration in Miss Ocky's. "No, the motive was not mercenary whatever else it may have been."

"There's this strike we've had on our hands," offered Jason. "I'll swear most of the men are decent fellows, but there are always some exceptions. They knew pretty well that Varr was the man who was fighting them—in other words, locking them out. With him out of the way, they knew they could count on better terms from me." He added diffidently, "Mightn't one of them have done it?"

"I spoke of the fires just now as being ineffective," replied Creighton. "I have gathered that they were. The second was the more serious of the two, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, was it serious enough to cripple the business? Was it a vital blow?"

"Not at all. The contents of the two buildings burned were worth money, of course, but they were only reserve stuff."

"But there are buildings in the yard whose loss might have hit you hard?"

"Oh, yes. Several."

"Then, if one of the striking workmen had set the fire, he would have selected one or more of them. I think we may safely assume that the incendiary was unfamiliar with the tannery and consequently was not one of the strikers."

"You win," said Jason Bolt, after a pause. "I've wondered why the scoundrel didn't touch off something more important, but the significance of his failure to do so never occurred to me. Go on, Mr. Creighton; I'm getting a lesson in straight thinking."

"Not so very straight," smiled the detective. "Given a fact, you have to think over and under and all around it before you can grasp its every implication. It's only because I've had a lot of experience that I can draw inferences a shade faster than the average man—and often quite as inaccurate!"

"If it wasn't either a striker or a person actuated by the desire for gain," said Krech, "who is left? What other motives are there for murder?"

"Revenge. Jealousy. What about the last, Miss Copley? Was he interested in any other woman than his wife?"

"No," said Miss Ocky, "and remarkably little in her!"

"Um. Friction?"

"No—not friction."

He saw her reluctance to answer this line of questioning and took it for granted that the presence of the others embarrassed her. He dropped the topic, intending to pursue it at a later, more favorable moment.

"Revenge," he continued. "Did Varr ever wrong

any one to the extent of driving them to murder him?"

"No," said Jason Bolt. "Simon was a hard man but not as bad as that."

"No," said Miss Ocky—but she had gasped, and Creighton had heard her. He made a mental note of that.

"We're getting along nicely," said Herman Krech, who never liked to be out of the limelight too long. "It wasn't for money, it wasn't for revenge, it wasn't jealousy; by the time we've eliminated a few more motives we'll have only the correct one left."

"Meanwhile," said Creighton, "what's going on in the house? Who is running the police show?"

"Chap named Norvallis," answered the big man. "The Sheriff, the County Physician and a few plain-clothes sleuths are in attendance, but Norvallis is the real leader of the gang. He has been going through the usual motions—asking everybody about everything—"

"Hold on!" broke in Jason. "I don't know that I agree with you. Seemed to me his questions were mighty casual and indifferent. Did it strike you that he had a sort of a pleased-with-himself air? I got the impression that he might already have made up his mind as to who was the guilty man and considered everything else relatively unimportant."

"It's not impossible that you're right," suggested Creighton. "The murderer may have left some glaring clue to his identity. Naturally, the police wouldn't talk about it until they got their hands on him. He turned to Krech. "You told him about this monk business, didn't you? How did he take it?"

"His first attitude," said Krech, "was that of a

polite but skeptical child listening to a bedtime story. I soon convinced him of its importance, though. He says it simplifies things."

"Um. He must be even quicker at inferences than I am!"

"By the way, I told him about you and he said he wanted to see you the moment you got here."

"Well, this is a nice time to tell me!" laughed Creighton. He stood up. "I'd better take my place in line."

"I can count on you, then, to help us in the matter of locating that notebook?" asked Jason Bolt.

"Yes, sir," the detective assured him for the second time. "I can promise to take a personal as well as a professional interest in this case. I feel deeply the fact that Mr. Varr should have met death in such a fashion after he became my client."

"You did what you could to warn him."

"Now, about my headquarters; there's a hotel in the town?"

"Yes, but I've been hoping you would let us put you up." Bolt wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"Mr. and Mrs. Krech are staying with us, but there's always room for one more."

"You're both talking nonsense," interrupted Miss Ocky. "The logical place for Mr. Creighton is right *here*."

"Kind of you, Miss Copley, but I hardly think I'll add to your problems. Let us agree that the hotel is the best for the time being. It is too soon yet to say where my activities will center."

XIV: Lucy Varr

THERE were four men in the living-room when Creighton tapped on the door and entered in response to a command. Two of them were standing by a French window which they appeared to be examining and discussing, and as Creighton knew that the theft of the notebook had been prefaced by the breaking of one of the windows in this room, he had no difficulty in deducing that this was the one and that the two men were plainclothes detectives of the county staff.

The other two were seated at the table in the center of the room, a litter of papers scattered in front of them. They looked up inquisitively as Creighton advanced and laid his card on the pile of memoranda before the more important gentleman of the pair.

"Ah, yes. Glad to meet you, Mr. Creighton. Very glad, indeed. My name's Norvallis—County Attorney's office. This is Sheriff Andrews, of Wayne County. Andrews, this is Mr. Peter Creighton of New York."

"Your name's familiar to me, Mr. Creighton," said Andrews, and stretched forth a long, bony arm with a calloused hand at the end of it. He was a mild-eyed individual with a soft, sweeping, tobacco-stained mustache. "I read the New York papers pretty reg'lar and I've followed one or two of your cases."

Norvallis was a stout, prosperous-looking man of forty-odd, a typical product of country politics. His manner was carefully bluff and hearty and character-

ized by a sort of *bonhomie* that was useful in impressing voters with the fact that he was a pretty good fellow, his close-set eyes sparkled with intelligence that his low brow defined as cunning rather than wisdom, and there were puffy semicircles beneath them that told of parties not entirely political.

"Your friend Krech told us the circumstances under which you were sent for," broke in Norvallis before Creighton could find some polite acknowledgment of the Sheriff's interest. "Must have been quite a shock to you to learn of Mr. Varr's death."

"It certainly was. Fortunately for my peace of mind, I took care yesterday to warn him against taking undue risks. He disregarded the advice."

"Oh. You warned him? You had some reason to believe his life was in danger?"

"Nothing so definite as that, but it was apparent that he had some sort of a queer, tough customer on his trail and it's always in order to take reasonable precautions."

"A queer customer, eh? This monk we've been hearing so much about! What opinion have you formed about that?"

"None at all," replied Creighton promptly.

Norvallis did not quite conceal the disappointment he felt at the flat negative. He changed the subject.

"I think you have a piece of evidence that should properly be turned over to me. Didn't Mr. Krech send you an anonymous note that Mr. Varr received from his enemy?"

"Yes." Creighton took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Norvallis. "There it is, in good order. I had it tested for fingerprints this morning before I left the city."

"Find any?"

"Only those made by Mr. Varr himself. Further than that, the microscope showed that the surface of the paper had been uniformly abraded before it was written on, as if the crook had taken a rubber eraser and removed all traces of any prints that might have been there already."

"Cautious devil, wasn't he?"

Creighton did not answer. His eye had suddenly fallen on an object imperfectly concealed beneath a blank sheet of paper at Norvallis' elbow.

"Is that the knife that was used?" he asked.

"Yes." The county official rather reluctantly uncovered the exhibit. "Don't touch!"

"No fear!" Creighton reassured him.

He moved nearer to the ghastly souvenir and bent over it. A fine bit of Oriental workmanship that any museum might have valued; the haft was of silver, exquisitely chased, the blade was straight and slender, narrowing to a needlelike point, so that it belonged rather to the stiletto type than the dagger. An inscription ran lengthwise down the steel, which was of a distinct bluish tinge where it was not darkly stained. About an inch from the tip a tiny triangular nick had been made in one of the sharp edges, the only flaw in the weapon's perfection. Creighton looked up from it to meet the Sheriff's speculative eye.

"Can you read what it says on the blade, Mr. Creighton?"

"No! I have my limitations."

"It means, 'I bring peace!'" The officer tugged at his mustache and smiled. "Miss Copley told us that. It belongs to her."

"Well, I expect she won't want it back."

Norvallis put down the anonymous letter which he had been reading. His eyes were alight with satisfaction.

"This case will make people talk when it gets into the papers, Mr. Creighton!"

"Sure to."

"Have you any other information, or evidence, or exhibit, for me?"

"Not a scrap."

"Mr. Varr's death must alter your plans, of course. May I ask if you are returning to New York this afternoon or evening?"

Creighton knew perfectly well that Norvallis had been eager to put that question since the moment he had come into the room. He shook his head smilingly.

"Mr. Bolt has invited me to do what I can to recover the notebook that was stolen from Mr. Varr's desk."

"Oh." Norvallis exchanged a quick glance with the Sheriff. "Then, in a sense, we'll be working together. Possibly it hasn't occurred to Mr. Bolt that when the murderer is found, the thief will be found."

"Yes, he knows that. But my inquiry may diverge from yours, Mr. Norvallis. It may have to go farther than yours. Of course, you realize that yourself."

"Eh? Ah—yes, yes!" said the other blankly.

"I expect our relations will be both amicable and of mutual benefit," continued Creighton cheerfully. "If I turn up anything good I'll let you know, and I can hope for as much from you, can't I?"

"Er—well, I don't know about that." Norvallis looked pink and uncomfortable as he began to fidget with the papers on the table. "I don't know about

that, Mr. Creighton. I may not feel free—er—no, on the whole I think it would be preferable if we conducted our investigations independently of each other. Yes, that would be better!” He had an air of relief as he got that dictum off his chest.

“All right,” agreed Creighton, still cheerfully. He surmised the reason for the official’s embarrassment; the police already knew, or thought they knew, the identity of the murderer, and it was a secret they proposed to guard jealously until they could cover themselves with glory by making an arrest. He did not blame them in the least, and accepted the rebuff good-humoredly. “As you please, Mr. Norvallis.”

The two men by the window apparently had concluded their examination. One of them sauntered over to the table and reported.

“Nothing much there, sir. There’s a few prints made by the butler opening and shutting the doors.”

“Just as I expected,” said Norvallis composedly. “Lucky we don’t have to rely on fingerprints in this case, Mr. Creighton.”

“Found none at all?”

“Not one. I’ll make you a present of that bit of news.”

“Thank you for nothing,” grinned Creighton, then added mischievously, “Of course, before you can find fingerprints you have to know where to look for them.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. You stick to that window and Varr’s desk and the hilt of this dagger—and leave the less obvious places to me.”

“Indeed. I suppose it would be useless for me to

ask you to designate some of those less obvious places?"

"Quite useless," answered Creighton truthfully.

He was smiling over that as he excused himself and left the room. He could not have answered the hypothetical question on a bet, for his remark had been a chance shot simply intended to annoy. No one would have been more surprised than himself to learn that this same shot would develop the qualities of a boomerang.

He was stopped in the hall by a pale, gray-haired man whose trembling hands betrayed the strain under which he labored.

"Mr. Creighton, isn't it, sir? Miss Copley told me to fix up some sandwiches and coffee in the butler's pantry. There's so many coming and going through the house she thought it would be quieter there. Mr. Krech is there already, waiting for you, sir."

"Very thoughtful of her. What is your name?"

"Edward Bates, sir. I'm the butler."

"Oh, yes, Miss Copley spoke of you. She tells me you handled things very well this morning after Mr. Varr was found."

"I did what I could, sir. I knew the body mustn't be moved, so I kept the news from Miss Lucy—that's Mrs. Varr, sir—until the police and the doctor got here."

"Knew that, did you? Been with the family long, Bates?"

"Thirty-five years, sir. I worked for old Mr. Copley before his daughter married Mr. Varr. This is a shocking business, sir."

The conversation carried them to the pantry door, whither Bates had led them. His hand was on the

knob when Creighton checked him with a touch on his elbow, at which the old man jumped nervously.

"One moment. A butler who keeps his ears open often knows a lot that other people don't. What is your idea about this? Can you guess who murdered Mr. Varr?"

"No, sir!" His voice was almost panicky. "Indeed I can't, sir!"

"Uh-huh," said Creighton easily. Was the old fellow suffering from frazzled nerves or from hidden knowledge? Another little matter for future examination. "By the way, how is Mrs. Varr standing the shock?"

"Not too well, sir. She bore up like the brave lady she is until Mr. Norvallis was through with her, then broke down. She's in bed. The doctor says she must keep quiet and that she'll be all right, but he's coming again this afternoon."

"Get him to give you something for yourself," was Creighton's kindly admonition. "You're trembling like a leaf. The family will be depending on you a lot these next few days. Don't let them down by getting sick."

"I won't, sir. Thank you, sir."

Creighton permitted him to escape, well satisfied with the new tone in the man's voice as he acknowledged his appreciation of the detective's interest. Creighton was never harsh with a witness, never tried to bulldoze or rattle him, until all else had failed. His policy was to put people at their ease and gentle them into talking freely, a course that was all the more facile for him by reason of his genuine sympathy and understanding and his native kindness.

Krech was waiting patiently behind a plate piled high with sandwiches. There was coffee, too, and

before the butler left them alone, he stood an interesting decanter on the table. A shadow of gloom that overspread the big man's extensive countenance was visibly lightened by this.

"Bolt's gone home," he announced. "Mrs. Bolt and Jean must be suffering agonies of curiosity. I stayed here because I felt I might be able to help you."

"Stout fellow," said Creighton with a grin, and selected a huge sandwich. "Where do you think we'd better begin?"

"There's no use adopting that superior attitude with me. You know perfectly well I come in handy at times. Say—I'm sore at Bolt! He did you out of a good job."

"Me? How come?"

"Did you notice three solid-looking citizens in the hall when you arrived? Well, that was the Board of Selectmen of Hambleton, yes, sirree, b'gosh. Bolt had told 'em you were coming and they were all het up. They don't get along with the county crowd too well, and for that reason they'd about decided to retain your services just to show they were ready to hold up their end. Then Bolt came along and blurted out that he had commissioned you to investigate the matter and they pulled their horns in like a bunch of frightened snails. If he had only kept still you could have made a deal with them."

"I see. And what makes you think I'd be guilty of the indelicacy of letting two outfits pay me for the same job?"

"'Thnot 'n 'ndelicathy," said Mr. Krech vigorously through a sandwich. "If Bolt can have a second string to his bow, why can't you have a couple of employers?"

"Krech, you're a nice fellow with all the instincts of a crook."

"Huh. I suppose nothing could ever lead you from the narrow path of rectitude?"

"No," laughed Creighton, "nothing ever could!"

"Well, it won't be the Hambleton Selectmen, anyway. The three of them were pale when they discovered how close they'd been to spending a bunch of money unnecessarily."

They finished their lunch without the loss of much time, the detective setting the pace. Once into a case, he could be as patient and plodding as an ox, but the preliminaries found him restless and impatient. He detested the inevitable gathering of masses and masses of information that must subsequently be pulled to pieces and mulled over until the most of it had been discarded and the important residue determined. It all took so much time—precious time that the criminal might be using to strengthen his own position.

"Let's have a look at the place marked 'X' in the picture," he suggested, rising. "Kitchen garden, wasn't it? That means the rear of the house. Let's go out this back way, through the kitchen. Sometimes it pays to look the servants over in a casual fashion before having them on the mat. They're less apt to be on guard."

He hustled cheerfully into the kitchen, asked a question or two about the exact location of the crime, and left the house by the rear door, Krech close behind.

"One Irish cook," summarized the detective when they were safely out of hearing. "Fat and fifty, good-natured and violent by turns. One rather pretty girl, a housemaid from the white cap, fright-

ened, been crying, inclined to be hysterical. Old Bates, the butler. Last, one gaunt, tall, vinegary, nondescript female. Who's the nondescript, Krech?"

"Search me. Here's the place."

Creighton took one look and groaned. Whatever precautions the police might have taken in the first stages of their investigation had evidently been relaxed thereafter. The garden might have been the scene of a recent rodeo. A mob of curious Hambletonians had held high revel in it from one end to the other.

"That ought to be classed as criminal negligence," snorted the detective, turning away.

"It's no use to you?" asked his friend disappointedly.

"Not for the moment. If I were nature-faking a book on Africa I could run a picture of it as an elephant's playground, but that's all." He stopped and gazed at the house long enough to memorize the windows that commanded a view of the garden. "No use going back there, now," he decided. "Chuck full of a man named Norvallis. Suppose we drop down to the tannery. Not far, is it? Where's that short cut through the woods in which Varr first saw his monk?"

"Right over here." The big man had gleaned that piece of information earlier in the day. The two men crossed the garden by its path, passing the very spot where Simon Varr had met his tragic end, and plunged into the trail. Like the garden, this had been trampled by a multitude of feet. "What are you going to do at the tannery?" asked Krech, yielding to his favorite weakness, curiosity.

"Talk to whoever is in charge. Poke around the premises. We know the crook was there twice, on

the occasions of the fires, and where a man has been he may leave a trace. It's an off-chance, but we can't neglect it."

In default of any orders to the contrary, the watchman, Nelson, was at his post behind the office building door, though he shrewdly suspected that the chief necessity for guarding the premises had ceased with their owner's death. He willingly admitted Krech, whom he recognized afar, and nodded comprehension when Creighton introduced himself and his present mission.

"Yes, sir, I've been wondering when you would get here."

"The deuce you have! You knew I was coming?"

"Yes, sir. I heard Mr. Bolt and this gentleman mentioning you yesterday as they went out of here."

Creighton turned and looked at his friend sardonically. Beneath that fixed regard Mr. Krech reddened, but stoutly defended himself.

"That was Jason Bolt," he averred. "He was full of the subject and I remember his chattering about it as we left."

"Um. Can't be helped now." He shifted his gaze to the watchman. "Do you remember if you mentioned it to any one?" Nelson hesitated, and the detective was on him in a flash. "You did! Speak out. Tell the truth, and you'll have no reason to be afraid of me or any one else. This is a murder case, you know. It's an awful mistake to hold anything back. Who did you tell?"

"Only one person sir. A woman. It just slipped out—"

"And probably did no harm. Don't get worried. Who was she?"

"A girl named Jones, sir, Drusilla Jones." An

expression akin to horror dawned in Nelson's eyes as he grasped for the first time the significance of what he was about to add. "She had been keeping company with a fellow named Charlie Maxon, who was put in jail a few days ago by Mr. Varr—and last evening Charlie drugged his keeper and never was missed until this morning!"

"My sainted aunt! What time did he break jail?"

"Moody—the keeper—says the last thing he remembers was the clock strikin' ten."

"Krech, do they know what time Varr was murdered?"

"Approximately at eleven."

"Let's hope for his sake that Charles has a whacking good alibi! Have you told the police about your talk with Drusilla Jones?"

"No, sir, they haven't been near me yet."

"Oh. Well, eventually you will find yourself having a heart-to-heart talk with a man named Norvallis. Don't fail to tell him about your chat with the lady—and you might just say that I advised you to repeat it to him, will you?"

"Why, yes, sir. Do you think that Charlie Maxon—?"

"No embarrassing questions, please! Now I'd like to have a look about, if I may."

"Yes, sir." Painfully anxious to escape any suspicion of withholding more information, Nelson hurriedly related the incident of the previous afternoon when he and Simon Varr had examined the tracks left by the incendiary. "There was some light rain last night, sir, but those I put the box over will be plain enough."

"Good. Show us where they are at once."

The watchman obeyed with alacrity.

Together the three men stood by the edge of the sluggish little brook and contemplated the tracks that Nelson indicated. The detective did not even take his eyes from them as he accepted and mechanically lighted one of the cigars that Krech offered his companions.

"Big feet!" said Krech presently.

"That's what Mr. Varr remarked yesterday, sir."

"Um." Creighton slowly came out of his trance. He pointed to a small piece of wood that lay down by the water's edge. "Krech, will you step down there and get that for me? I want to look at it."

"Sure." Astonished but amiable, the detective's willing assistant strode to the object indicated and retrieved it handsomely. His astonishment increased when Creighton, after turning it over two or three times in his hands, suddenly pitched it into the water. "Don't like it?"

"No. That's all I want here just now."

They returned to the office building, where Creighton patiently questioned Nelson at some length about the various phases of the strike. It was not until they had left the tannery and were walking back up the hill that Krech was able to put an eager question.

"What was the racket with that piece of wood?"

"That was a stunt to cover my real interest from the watchman. No use letting the whole world in on what I'm thinking about."

"You didn't fool him any more than you did me. Please explain why I'm going home with over an inch of mud on my expensive shoes."

"I wanted you to make a set of tracks alongside those of the incendiary. I didn't want to ask you

right out loud to do it, so I asked you to get me that bit of wood. When you did so, you left a very nice set of footprints parallel with his. Thus I was enabled to compare them, as were you, if you happened to think of doing so."

"Well, I didn't! Why should I?"

"Suppose you were a small man about to commit a crime and wished to disguise yourself past recognition. What would you do?"

"Make myself look like a large man," said Krech slowly.

"Exactly. Suppose again that you were an educated man about to write an anonymous, threatening letter. How would you go about doing that?"

"I'd use a typewriter to conceal my handwriting. I'd sign the thing in an awkward scrawl." Krech saw the drift of it now. "And I'd take good care to misspell a bunch of words!" he concluded triumphantly.

"That he faked illiteracy was a pure surmise, a mere possibility, until now, when it gains color from the evidence of the footprints. A mental twist that would make a small man disguise himself as a large one would make an educated man resort to illiteracy. Logical, I think."

"Very likely. But how did you get this from footprints?"

"They were too shallow. I noticed that at once, and proved it by parading yours alongside them. That fellow wore shoes as big as yours and was running to boot, but his tracks were scarcely half the depth of those you made. Get it?"

"Oh, yes," said Krech rather mournfully. "Two and two always make four when you add them up. They never run to more than three and a half for

me." He sighed. "Creighton, I'd like once—just for *once*—to score a beat over you!"

"Well, you may do it in this very case," remarked his friend encouragingly. "You never can tell."

XV: Treasure Trove

THE instant they stepped into the house they knew that the police had left it. A calm, almost holy, peace seemed to have settled upon the place, a far more fitting atmosphere considering the motionless form that lay in a room upstairs, its eyes closed and its face more reposeful than ever it had been in life. "I bring peace," wrote some long-forgotten craftsman on the blade of the dagger he had just fashioned, and in some measure wrote the truth.

"And I've got to stir them all up again," said Creighton half regretfully.

"Can't make omelets without breaking eggs," was the responsive platitude from Herman Krech. "I suppose you mean you're going to start in asking questions."

"Millions of 'em. I've been here just a few hours and I've barely scratched the surface of this case, yet I've learned already that Mr. Varr had a fine bunch of evil-wishers. Where is that desk which was broken open? Do you know?"

"Yes. It's in a small study in the back of the house that he used as a sort of office, I guess. Come along and I'll show you. There's not a soul in sight and we may as well make ourselves at home."

Creighton agreed, but before they reached the study a light step on the stairs warned them that their privacy was to be invaded. Miss Ocky advanced upon them with determination, and instantly revealed that she had at least one quality in common with the inquisitive Mr. Krech.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "What have you been doing? I sent Bates to look for you a while ago and he reported you missing."

"Anything special, Miss Copley?"

"Mostly curiosity," she confessed shamelessly. "I've never seen a detective at work and I've always wanted to. I think yours must be the most fascinating profession in the world even if it's a rather sad one. Don't you find after looking into the hearts of people and dissecting their mean little minds and motives that you grow cynical on the subject of humanity?"

"Indeed I do not," he answered earnestly. "Your question makes you sound more cynical than I ever dreamed of being. My experience is that very few persons have mean minds and motives, and they are often victims of some pressure of circumstance they can't control or resist. I've put handcuffs on more than one poor devil for whom I've had nothing but sympathy."

"You put them on just the same, though?"

"Certainly. I'm supposed to, you know."

"It seems very hard-hearted. If you knew that 'poor devil' was morally justified in committing his crime, wouldn't you be tempted to—leave the key of the handcuffs where he could get it?"

"Tempted, perhaps; that's all."

"Suppose it was some one who had a claim on you—a sister or brother or child?"

"You must ask that of some unfortunate sleuth with a family. My nearest relative is a third cousin who lives in Chicago but has nevertheless shown no criminal tendency to date. I'm remarkably well-protected from any potential struggle between duty and inclination." He smiled, and added apologeti-

cally, "Detective ethics is a pretty complicated subject to discuss, and I'm afraid it isn't getting on with the problem of who stole a notebook from Simon Varr's desk."

"Of course it isn't—and I'm much more interested in seeing you attack that! But I warn you our conversation is only postponed!"

They entered the study, where Creighton went straight to the window and stood looking out at the now devastated garden where Simon Varr had been found.

"Who *did* find him, by the way?" he voiced a sudden thought.

"Katie, the cook. She came down first, as usual, and saw a man lying flat on his back in the tomato patch. Her first idea was that some one had taken a drop too much and had strayed there and gone to sleep, so she went up to Bates' room and routed him out. He came down and discovered the awful truth—and he behaved wonderfully. He seemed to know just what had to be done, and he actually managed to keep the news from the family until official permission had been received to bring the body into the house. Poor Lucy—my sister—was at least spared the thought of his lying out there."

"Who saw him last—in the house, I mean, of course?"

"Bates, who brought him a decanter of whisky here to the study, wished him good-night and left him."

"What time was that? Did the butler notice?"

"Yes, because he was interested in getting to bed. It was about ten-thirty."

"Um. He was left here—alone—with a decanter of whisky and a troubled mind. It's safe to assume

that he took a drink or so. Tell me, was your brother-in-law an impulsive sort of person—liable to outbursts of passion—inclined to do things in a headlong, reckless way?"

"A very good description indeed."

"I've been wondering how he happened to be out in the garden so opportunely for the murderer. If he was sitting in this room, looked out the window and spotted the fellow hanging around, his first impulse might have been to rush from the house and tackle him. Does that impress you as being a likely scenario, Miss Copley?"

"Very. To tell you the truth, when he was really angry I'm inclined to think he was scarcely responsible for his actions."

"His enemy knew that, you may be sure, and counted on it to his own advantage. Now, another question about the matter of time. You told me Krech, that the hour of the murder had been approximately set at eleven. Do you know how that was determined?"

"It was the doctor's opinion, for one thing. Then it was pretty plausibly substantiated by a trick of the weather. There was a shower at eleven-thirty last night from which the ground was still wet early this morning. The local Chief of Police covered himself with glory by noticing that the earth beneath Varr's body was as dry as a bone when they took him up."

"Good enough. I must have a chat with that lad. I wonder if he noticed anything else that was useful."

"Somebody did," commented Miss Ocky thoughtfully. "There was a man out there making a plaster cast of some footprints. Why do you suppose he was doing that, Mr. Creighton?"

"My golly!" The detective's eyes flashed with excitement. "Did you see them, Miss Copley?"

"Yes, but they meant nothing to me."

"How large were they, do you remember?" He waved a hand at Mr. Krech's extremities. "Large as those?"

"Oh, my, no," said Miss Ocky, glancing at the objects indicated. "Not nearly as large as those."

"I'd like to interrupt these proceedings," declared Krech in an injured voice, "long enough to remark that any sculptor would tell you they are beautifully proportioned to my size."

"I wasn't criticizing their—architecture," said the lady.

"Second time to-day he's called attention to them!"

"Shameful. What was the first?"

"Oh, that was rather interesting. I'll tell you about it if he'll let me."

"Tell me anyway. He doesn't seem to be paying any attention to us at all. What is he doing?"

"Hush! he's thinking," said the big man vindictively after a brief inspection of his friend. "He always looks like that when he thinks. Scientists aver the eye reflects the mind; note the perfect blankness of his?"

That effectively aroused Creighton from his momentary abstraction. He grinned at the two of them.

"Pay no attention to him, Miss Copley. Yes, you can tell her what we found at the tannery, Krech." He looked at Miss Ocky. "That is in deference to your interest in the art of detection; may I count on you not to breathe a word of what I tell you to any one?"

"You may."

"It's a bargain. Go ahead, Krech, while I amuse myself looking over his desk."

Miss Ocky listened eagerly to Krech's somewhat embroidered account of their activities at the tannery, but managed to keep an eye on Peter Creighton the while. He was going over the desk and its roll-top cover inch by inch, peering at its surface, trailing his fingertips over the polished wood in case touch might find something that vision hadn't. Once he interrupted Krech by asking him to bring a magnifying glass from his bag in the hall.

"What are you looking for?" asked Miss Ocky in the interim.

"Nothing—anything. I expect the first and may chance on the second. This is just routine, Miss Copley. When I know a crook has been in a certain spot, I go over the place with a fine-tooth comb. You'd be surprised to know the number of microscopic bits of evidence a man can leave behind him in spite of every precaution."

"Have you found anything here?"

"No." He accepted the glass that Krech handed him and went back to his task. "This fellow was careful, sure enough."

The big man resumed his story. She interrupted him with a quick little exclamation when she heard of Charlie Maxon's escape. Her interest brought a question from the detective.

"Know him, Miss Copley?"

"I've spoken to him once or twice. Casually."

"How did that happen? Where did you meet him?"

"In a grocery store in the town. He came in for something while I was there. Of course he knew

who I was, and he started talking to me about the strike and how hard it was on the men."

"Um. What sort of a chap is he? Capable of—murder?"

"Good gracious, I don't think so!" Miss Ocky straightened in her chair and shot a quick glance at the detective. "He's the agitator type—more bark than bite. I don't believe he'd have the courage to kill a man. Is—is he suspected?"

"I can't tell you. We may know more about that after the inquest—unless Norvallis gets it adjourned, which he may. I don't think he'll want to show his hand so soon."

"This will be a spicy bit of gossip for Janet," mused Miss Ocky half to herself, then caught Creighton's raised eyebrow and explained her remark. "Janet Mackay is my maid, and she used to know Maxon in Scotland when he was a youngster."

"Um. Have they seen anything of each other lately?"

"No. Janet has no use for him. She says he was always getting into trouble as a boy."

"He doesn't seem to have lost the habit. Is Janet a tall thin woman who wears steel-rimmed glasses?"

"Yes. You noticed her in the kitchen this morning, didn't you? She told me you went through that way."

"Has she been with you long?"

"Twenty-five years. She came here as a sort of companion-maid to my sister and me a few years before my father's death. She was very fond of Lucy, but she didn't care so much for Simon, so when I went East I took her with me. We've been together ever since."

"No need to ask, then, if you trust her."

"Trust her! Trust Janet?" Miss Ocky's voice was warm. "I'd trust her with my life!"

Creighton dropped the subject, but added another fragment to the data he was compiling. Janet, the nondescript lady, didn't care much for Varr, and was acquainted with Charlie Maxon. Important? Um—too soon to say. He concentrated his attention once more on his search.

"Nothing," he finally announced briefly. He rose as he spoke—he had been on his hands and knees the better to examine the floor in front of the desk—and shrugged his shoulders philosophically. "Said I expected as much, didn't I? Now for that window in the living-room."

Krech had finished his story and Miss Ocky was looking at the detective with considerable interest and some respect.

"That was clever of you to notice the shallowness of the footprints," she said. "And your deductions from them and the note are quite shrewd. A small educated man instead of a large illiterate one?"

"Yes. Not that I'd advise you to bet on it. Quite often the brilliant deduction falls by the wayside and leaves the obvious conclusion to jog home a winner. You had a good look at the fellow didn't you? You got the impression that he was tall? How tall?"

"Oh, six feet perhaps. It was dusk, you know, and he brushed by me very quickly. I was too scared to do much observing!"

"Uncomfortable experience," said Krech, "having a masked monk pop out at you from a peaceful countryside. What did you think about it? Did you know the fool legend?"

"N-no. I learned about that next day from Sheila

Graham. I was telling her my experience and she remembered the story and went and got the book."

"She's the daughter of Billy Graham, the manager whom Varr had decided to get rid of?" Creighton's face was serious.

"How in the world did you know *that*?" cried Miss Ocky.

"Gossip. I love to listen to it. Ever talk to a chap named Nelson, a watchman at the tannery? He's full of it." It was a trick of Peter Creighton's to sound most flippant when he was soberest inside, and Krech, who knew it, fell to watching him sharply. But the detective's face was inscrutable. "So Graham's daughter had a book containing the legend of the monk, eh? Just what was the trouble between him and Mr. Varr?"

"Well—I suppose I may as well tell you," said Miss Ocky reluctantly. "It wouldn't be right to keep anything back from you, especially as you'd be bound to hear about it anyway. The trouble between them was mostly started by my brother-in-law, who objected to the interest his son was showing in Sheila Graham. They considered themselves engaged—"

"What? Varr had a son?" Creighton broke in on her abruptly, unconsciously raising his voice in his surprise. "Where is he?"

"His father drove him from the house!" cried a hoarse voice from the door. "I don't know where he is. He ought to be with me now—and *I don't know where he is!*"

Creighton wheeled swiftly toward the speaker, Krech shot out of his chair as though a powerful spring had been released beneath him, and Miss Ocky darted, birdlike, to the side of a slender figure which

swayed in the doorway, gripping the woodwork for support. It was Lucy Varr.

"Lucy! What are you doing down here?" Miss Ocky circled her sister's slender waist with a gently compelling arm. "Come with me!"

"I rang and rang and nobody came. I wanted water. I was *so* thirsty!" She muttered the words feverishly and the brightness of her big eyes told its own story of a tortured brain. "I heard somebody talking in here—"

"Come, Lucy! I'll bring you the water."

"Was it *you* who was asking for my son?" Her gaze passed over Krech, whom she appeared vaguely to recognize, and fixed itself on the grave, sympathetic face of the detective. "You're Mr. Creighton, aren't you? They tell me you have come to find out who killed my husband—"

"Lucy, dear! Please—"

"I—I'm sure I wish you luck!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Varr," said Creighton quietly, choosing to ignore the irony in her tone. "I'll do my very best, I promise you."

His promise was made to her retreating figure as she finally permitted her sister to lead her away. Left alone, the two men exchanged a quick glance and were silent for a minute. Then Krech jerked his head toward the door significantly.

"Could it be—her?" he whispered.

"Not grammatically!" retorted Creighton with a grin, much as if his friend's query had freed him from a spell. "Piffle, Krech. If a woman like that—high-strung, nervous—were to kill a man it would be in some swift fit of passion. Varr's death came as the climax of a deliberate campaign of persecution. She isn't capable of that."

"If you can tell me what any woman can or can't do—"

"Oh, I grant them an infinite capacity for surprising a man! However, this interesting little interlude isn't getting us anywhere. Come into the living-room. I want a look at that window before daylight goes."

"The police have probably mucked that all up," said Mr. Krech gloomily.

"I heard one of the detectives tell Norvallis they had found nothing. Anyway, if I don't miss my guess, they were so satisfied with something they're keeping up their sleeve that I don't believe they paid more than cursory attention to other details. Just gave everything a perfunctory once-over and let it go at that."

"What have they got, Creighton? Do you know?"

"Charlie Maxon seems an attractive prospect," replied the detective. They had gone to the window in the living-room and he was busily engaged upon the same eager scrutiny that he had given the desk. "They may have discovered something that links him with the murder—that business of taking plaster casts of footprints is very suggestive. Maxon could have reached here after breaking jail in plenty of time to knife Varr in keeping with the schedule as we know it. He's an ugly customer by reputation, and he certainly had no reason to love Simon Varr."

"How did he get the dagger? He didn't steal it, because the evening it was stolen he was safe in the hoosgow."

"Correct, Krech, absolutely correct." The detective was intently studying the brass lock of the door through his powerful glass. "Now you've

started thinking, persevere! If Maxon committed the murder but didn't steal the knife, what's the answer?"

"An accomplice!" cried Krech. "A whole gang, perhaps!"

"Oh, don't be extravagant. One accomplice will do for the time being." Creighton dropped to his knees and transferred his interest to the flooring of the piazza outside the window and the carpet within. "*By golly!*"

The phrase fairly exploded from his lips. Krech, abandoning his cogitations, came quickly to his side, eager to learn what this exclamation portended.

Creighton, with his habitual care to miss nothing, had not contented himself with exploring the surface of the veranda or the surface of the heavy gray carpet that covered the floor of the room from edge to edge. That finished, he had thrust his fingers between the carpet and the wood of the window-sill, holding it back with one hand while he passed his magnifying glass over the accumulation of dust and dirt and sweepings that lay in the crack. His pains were rewarded. A tiny scrap of something that glittered in its nest of dirt caught his eye, but it was not until it lay on the tip of one finger beneath his glass that he realized the importance of his treasure trove. It was then he exclaimed.

"What is it?" asked Krech, craning for a better look.

"See for yourself!" Very carefully the detective pushed the object from his finger on to one of his friend's. "Don't drop it. What do *you* think it is? Here—take the glass."

"A chip of metal, I should say. Steel. Blue steel."

"Blue steel! Where have you seen blue steel before to-day?"

"Gee Joseph! That dagger!"

"Right. Did you notice the nick in it near the point?"

"N-no. They wouldn't let me really look at it."

"Well, there was one! And this piece will fit that nick, or I'm a dumb-bell! His eyes were dancing with delight. "Know what this means?"

"Y-yes. When the fellow slipped back the catch of this window he nicked the blade. Probably never noticed it. This piece fell to the floor and has been there ever since."

"Fell to the floor—yes. It isn't likely that it went neatly into the crack. It was swept there. Ever stop to think that the detective's best friend is the housemaid who scamps her work? Bless their little souls, they will sweep into cracks! But that isn't what I had in mind when I asked you if you knew what this means?"

"Maybe I could dope it out in time—"

"He opened this window with the dagger! Don't you get it?"

"My brain isn't hitting on all sixteen cylinders—"

"Listen. The assumption has been that he broke in here, took the dagger from the table where it lay handy, and forced Varr's desk. If he got the dagger after he entered the house, why did he then force the window with it?"

"Gee Joseph! It's a blind! He faked the breaking and entering to make it appear an outside job!"

"Yes." Creighton's face was solemn as he reclaimed his chip of steel and added the obvious corollary to Krech's deduction. "If it's not an out-

side job it must be an inside one. Somebody in this house took that dagger and notebook."

"I'll bet it was—!"

"Hush!" whispered the detective sharply. "Some one coming!"

XVI: A Woman of Note

AT the warning sound of approaching footsteps, Creighton whipped an envelope from his pocket and dropped into it the precious bit of blue steel he had recovered from the crack beneath the French window; he smoothed down the carpet with a quick sideways flirt of his foot, thrust the envelope into his coat, and had barely time to hiss one further admonition into Krech's attentive ear.

"Not a word of this to a soul!"

"My lips are sealed," declared the big man.

Miss Ocky entered the room to find two gentlemen engaged in conversation close by an open window out of which they were looking while their backs were tranquilly turned to the apartment. When she said, "Excuse me!" they pivoted about as one, and the synchronic promptitude with which they uttered the same question did credit to their bringing up.

"How is Mrs. Varr?"

"Much quieter—much better, thank you." Miss Ocky lighted a cigarette with the air of one who has earned it, and dropped wearily into a chair. "I was as much upset as you must have been when she turned up there in the study. Hardly necessary to make excuses for her, is it? She is not very strong, and she has been through enough in the last two days to wreck an Amazon."

"Doctor worried about her?" asked Krech. "Is there anything Mrs. Bolt or my wife can do? I know that's the first thing they'll ask."

"Not a thing. Please thank them both for me.

I'm not a bit diffident about asking favors of people and they can be sure I'll call for help if I need it. No, the doctor isn't alarmed; he just wants her to sleep as much as possible until the worst of the mental strain is over."

A faint clatter of silverware from the dining-room aroused Krech to the passage of time. He looked at his watch and started as if he had been stung.

"Nearly seven! I'm a ruined man! Where on earth is Jason Bolt? He was to call for me long before this."

"That's true—you're stranded, aren't you? I'd forgotten you came with him." Miss Ocky reflected briefly. "I simply can't leave here myself just now, but I'll have Janet take the car and drive you home."

"Janet?" inquired Creighton. "Drives a car, does she? Quite an accomplished lady's-maid!"

"She's a remarkable person," said Miss Ocky. "I'll tell you about her some other time. Now—about yourself! Will you let me save you from the horrors of the local hotel?"

"I was going to ask you if your invitation was still open," answered the detective hesitantly. "But under the circumstances—with your sister ill—haven't you enough trouble on your hands?"

"This house runs itself, thank to Bates," she replied quickly. She met his eye frankly. "You won't inconvenience us in the least, and I'd really be grateful if you would stay. So would my sister. With only old Bates in the house she is inclined to be nervous while—while that man is still at large."

"It is very gracious of you to put it that way," he murmured.

"That's settled," she said briskly, and stood up. "Now I'll go find Janet."

"So Janet's a remarkable person, is she?" muttered Krech when Miss Ocky had left the room. "Hers was the name I was about to mention when you stopped me. Janet Mackay knows Charlie Maxon!"

"Easy! Don't let your imagination run away with you. What conceivable motive could she have had to conspire against Varr's life?"

"I don't know." Krech grinned. "If I lay the foundation, it's up to you to erect the edifice. Brain-work, not manual labor, is my forte." Then he added more seriously, "I've thought of something; instead of the accomplice being actually a member of the household, mightn't he be just some one who has the entrée—the run of the house? Some one who could carry off the situation if he had been discovered in the living-room or study by the servants?"

"That's a good point, Krech; a very good point. I'll inquire into that possibility."

"So you're going to make this your headquarters?"

"Assuredly." Creighton tapped his pocket. "This decided it."

"Well—take care of yourself, won't you?" There was genuine concern in the big man's voice as he went on with specious flippancy. "Miss Copley left a dagger kicking around; let's hope she hasn't dropped an automatic or a machine-gun here and there. If Mr. Monk got the idea that you knew too much—"

"All right." Creighton reached out and gave Krech's arm an affectionate squeeze. "Don't worry; I'm an artist at taking care of myself."

"I know a darn' sight better!" growled Krech, and the honking of a horn from the driveway ended their talk. "Good-by. I'm going to pump Jason Bolt

and if I glean anything I'll let you know in the morning."

Creighton waved good-night to him from the veranda and stepped back into the house to find the maid awaiting him in the hall.

"Your bag has gone up, sir. Shall I show you your room?"

"Thank you. By the way, what is your name?"

"Betty, sir. Betty Blake."

"Very pretty name, too." He motioned her to precede him up the stairs. "Been with Mrs. Varr long?"

"About four months, sir."

"Are you a Hambleton girl?"

"Yes, sir, born and bred."

The room assigned to him was one of the best in the house. It was next to Miss Ocky's own, he was to discover later, and like hers it had a small rounded balcony outside the tall windows. He glanced about him appreciatively. He could rough it with any man, but he vastly preferred to be comfortable. Here he would be, if his eye didn't deceive him.

"Native, eh?" he continued conversationally as the girl made to leave him. "Then you must know every one in these parts. For instance—do you know a young man called Maxon?"

"Charlie Maxon?" She tossed her head. "Yes, I know *him*!" Her accent was richly scornful. "Pity they couldn't keep him in jail!"

There was a writing table with note paper on it in one corner of the room, and as she finished speaking a scrap of crumpled paper on the floor beneath it caught her eye. With instinctive neatness she went across the room and picked it up, steadying herself as

she stooped by resting her fingertips lightly on the pile of paper.

"Is there anything more, sir?"

"Thank you, no," replied Creighton absently.

When she had closed the door behind her he went over by the writing table and stood looking down at the topmost sheet of paper. The maid's orderly spirit had given him a hint that he thought he might profitably employ. He picked up the paper and held it slantwise to the light of the window while he peered at its surface. Then he nodded contentedly.

He drew forth his pencil and made a neat number one at the top of the sheet, which he then dropped in a drawer of the desk. He found a clean page in a small memo-book that he carried and made a careful entry; "1. Betty Blake."

"I'll get 'em all before I finish," he promised himself.

He went downstairs a few minutes later to meet the butler on his way up with the announcement that dinner was served; a welcome piece of news to a man who had had a long day on sandwiches only.

"Just the two of us," Miss Ocky greeted him as he entered the dining-room. "I'll pay you the compliment of admitting that the arrangement suits me perfectly. A crowd would have been terrible, but to have dined by myself would have been ghastly."

"Nothing could have pleased me better," said the detective as they seated themselves. "It has been growing increasingly clear to me that I must look to you for a great deal of information. Yours is the most authoritative voice around here."

"I'll play oracle within reason."

"Um. Don't let's start off with a reservation like that, Miss Copley. You made a naïve, but very wise,

remark this afternoon when you said you might just as well tell me something, especially as I was bound to find it out anyway. Stick to that maxim. It will save me time and you trouble."

"Mmph!" said Miss Ocky.

"About there only being two of us for dinner," continued the detective, blandly ignoring the sniff, "there's a matter I'd like to clear up. Where is Mr. Varr's son? Was the trouble between them so bitter that it is to be perpetuated after death?"

"I couldn't bring myself to speak about that until we were by ourselves," said Miss Ocky. She looked up at Bates with a friendly glance. "I know you won't repeat anything, Bates! The trouble between Simon and his son grew out of Copley's attachment for Sheila Graham. I like her extremely, so I found myself in opposition to Simon. I cast myself in the rôle of the heavy fairy godmother and took a hand in shaping the destinies of the young couple—a fond aunt has an inalienable right to barge into her nephew's affairs, hasn't she?"

"Second only to a grandmother's," he assured her.

"I persuaded them to elope," confessed Miss Ocky. "No date was set for it that I heard of. Yesterday Copley succeeded in finding a job on the *Hambleton News* as a reporter—and the editor, Mr. Barlow, when he arrived here this morning to cover this story told me that the boy had immediately celebrated his getting a job by asking for a two-week vacation to attend to some personal business. He left Hambleton last night for parts unknown. Meanwhile, Sheila Graham had gone to visit friends in New York for a fortnight. If you're a good detective, Mr. Creighton, you may make the right deduction."

"He started off on a honeymoon the very day his father was murdered. Rather—unpleasant coincidence."

"It struck me that way. I've been keeping mum just on that account. Norvallis was apparently satisfied with a statement that Copley is temporarily absent and that we are trying to get in touch with him."

"Norvallis is a very amiable gentleman; he has his reasons for being so, I think. As for Copley—well, a good many newspapers will carry the story of what happened last night and he will undoubtedly read it by to-morrow morning—possibly this evening. Then he will come home."

"Keeping his marriage—if there was one—dark, I trust. With the opposition—er—removed, I think it would be more suitable to have a public ceremony after a decent interval."

"Um. A matter of taste, perhaps. Personally, I've seen so much trouble caused by secret marriages that I'm inclined to eye them doubtfully. But—may I ask you a few questions about the less romantic adventures of the young man? Mrs. Varr declared this afternoon that her husband had driven him from the house. Was their disagreement—violent?"

"You must make allowances for my sister's nervous condition," answered Miss Ocky quickly. Her perceptions were instantly alive to whither this shift in the conversation might lead, and she resolved to limit the information she gave him as much as possible to the facts he would surely discover for himself. "Simon and Copley talked over the situation, night before last; Lucy naturally exaggerates the affair."

"Mr. Varr and his son quarreled. Isn't that the plain truth?"

"Doesn't a quarrel depend somewhat on the natures of the two people involved, Mr. Creighton? Simon was fearfully obstinate, and Copley is a little high-tempered—just to the extent that is becoming to a young man with any spirit—and I suppose that what might be merely a normal discussion between two such natures might—might seem like a quarrel to other people. Mightn't it?" she added, not very hopefully.

Despite himself, the detective was forced to grin at this ingenuous, or ingenious, argument.

"They quarreled," he summed it up, regaining his gravity. "If you will recollect, Miss Copley, when you came into the sitting-room a while ago you excused your sister's indisposition on the plea that she had been through enough the last *two* days to wreck an Amazon. Why *two* days, unless it was the quarrel between her husband and her son that worried her all of yesterday?"

"Oh, heavens! You're worse than a dictaphone!" Miss Ocky made a face at him. "There's no help for it—I must go into a silence."

"Please don't, until I've asked one more thing. You can answer freely, or the station master will. If Copley went to town last night, what trains were available?"

"Only one," she admitted slowly. "There's a through train from the West that stops at Hambleton for water—at midnight!"

"Ah," said Peter Creighton, then wished he hadn't.

A high-tempered youth—a pig-headed father—a balked romance—a quarrel—a murder at eleven

and a train away at midnight. These facts paraded through Creighton's brain and to a certain extent got ready to parade right on out of it. He could think all around a given subject, as he had described the process to Jason Bolt, and he was no fool to commit himself to half-baked hypotheses. Any theory of Copley's guilt could be countered with the same objection he made to Krech's hasty indictment of Mrs. Varr; a boy like that might strike down a man in the heat of passion but he would hardly set himself to calculated murder—or if he did, he would certainly arrange a better finish than a clumsy attempt at flight.

He became aware that Miss Copley was watching him anxiously while he meditated. He met her eyes—very nice eyes they were, he reflected—and it was too bad they should reveal fear, as they had since his monosyllabic exclamation.

"Are—are you suggesting—"

"Nothing, Miss Copley—nothing! Frankly and honestly! If you will permit me to say so, I think you are trying to make a mountain out of this mole-hill yourself. I haven't a doubt in the world that your nephew will turn up with every minute of last evening properly accounted for." He welcomed the slow reversion to normal of her expression. "Come, if I'm a dictaphone, let's pretend I'm turned off! Shall we talk of something else than murder? One might as well dine to jazz!"

That brought a smile to her lips—a quavery, uncertain little smile but an augury of better ones to come.

"With all my heart," she agreed. "What are your conversational preferences?"

"Anything but shop. May I ask you a personal question?"

"Personal questions are always the most interesting."

"I've heard you addressed once or twice as 'Miss Ocky,' and I've been wondering just what the abbreviation stands for?"

"Oh! You've landed squarely on a sore spot, but no matter. My father, bless him, was one of the dearest men that ever lived, but now and then he would get some particularly quaint idea into his head and proceed to carry it out in spite of every opposition. I arrived in this world on a chilly autumn day and was duly presented to my father's gaze. He was quite inexperienced about babies and it's recorded of him that he stared at me aghast and said: 'My gad, what a bleak-looking object!' That inspired some by-standing lunatic to observe that I doubtless took after the month, and my father promptly exclaimed: 'October! What a jolly fine name for her. We'll call her October!'" Miss Ocky sighed resignedly. "They let him get away with it. I was christened October. It has the sole merit of being distinctive!"

"My golly!" Creighton had listened to the concluding phrases of her anecdote with wonderment writ large on his face. He carefully put his knife and fork on his plate and leaned back in his chair while he continued to regard her with a rapt expression. "Are you October Copley?"

"Yes!" laughed the lady.

"*The* October Copley?"

"I'm quite unique, I believe," said Miss Ocky cheerfully.

"Did you write 'Thibetan Trails,' 'Passages from

Persia' and those bully Chinese things with the queer title?"

"'Chiliads of China.' Yes, I wrote 'em. Don't sit there and tell me you've read them!"

"Read them—I've *loved* them! It's a wonder I didn't connect your name with them at once. My wits have been woolgathering. But, hang it! Who could have expected to find an internationally famous writer and traveler stuck away in this corner of the world? Why haven't seventeen or ninety people *told* me who you were?"

She laughed at his eager interest.

"A prophet is without honor in his own country," she said. "To my family I'm just Ocky; to the natives of Hambleton I'm only 'that Copley girl with the queer name who's come back from furrin parts'."

She laughed again, half surprised and half embarrassed, as he suddenly rose from his chair, marched around the table, shook hands with her and solemnly marched back again to his seat.

"Meeting a stray Miss Copley is one thing," he assured her. "Meeting October Copley is quite another matter."

It was impossible for her not to be touched by such sincere, whole-hearted enthusiasm. Her throat tightened queerly. Bates, too, an astonished spectator of the scene, was discreetly impressed. A stand-offishness that he had felt toward Peter Creighton, the detective, was weakened in favor of a man who thus appreciated his own Miss Ocky. An artist in simple gestures, he testified to his new approbation by refilling the wineglass beside Creighton's plate.

"Now, tell me what you are doing here. I can't believe it is really you sitting opposite me, there!

If any one had asked me ten minutes ago where I supposed you might be, I would have answered that you were probably hunting hippopotamusses in the Himalayas or—or—”

“Tigers in Africa!” suggested Miss Ocky. “No, here I really am.” Creighton had already noticed that she was usually divided between two moods, an amused, faintly mocking one, and another that had somehow an undercurrent of sadness. This last seemed to hold her as she added, “Here to stay, I think. My wanderings are done and now I must—settle down.”

“Another great light has just burst on me,” exclaimed Creighton. “Janet Mackay! She must be the companion you refer to so often in your travel books. By golly, was it she who dove beneath an ice-pack and brought you back to the air-hole through which you had fallen?”

“That was indeed Janet! I repaid the favor later by valiantly dashing into a burning hotel and releasing her from a beam that had dropped across her—well, she’d call ’em limbs! Regular movie stuff. Yes, Janet and I are now fearfully responsible for each other.”

“There was no mention of the fire in any of your books.”

“Mmph. I’d be apt to bust into print with that, wouldn’t I? But I don’t mind informing you—just between us girls, as your friend Mr. Krech would say—that you’re in the presence of an honest-to-goodness heroine!”

“I knew that,” said Peter Creighton simply.

There followed for him a somewhat curious evening. No detective worth his salt will permit extraneous matters to thrust themselves between his

mind and the immediate problem with which it should be occupied, and Creighton really had a very high sense of duty. When they had taken themselves out of the house and settled down in the cozy corner of the big veranda, he punctiliously strove to concentrate on a dagger and a notebook and a murder, but ever and anon, as he tried to post himself on the manifold ramifications of the affair to date, the conversation would persist in taking unexpected trips to the Orient. His interest in this topic was so keen that he blamed these divagations on himself, and since a clever woman is cleverer than the cleverest man, it never once occurred to him that the guiding-reins of their talk lay in a pair of slender, capable, sun-browned hands. Miss Ocky preferred almost any subject that evening to the one of paramount importance.

He sat a while after she bade him good-night and left him, his thoughts a medley of vague impressions, confused, half-formed, inchoate. He tried to fix his mind on Simon Varr and ended by surrendering it to the vivid, vital personality of Miss Ocky.

When he went upstairs to his room the first object that caught his attention was a slender volume, beautifully bound, that lay on his dressing-table. "The Mystery of Lhasa." He had not heard of that one. A glance at the title-page accounted for that. Privately printed. On the flyleaf, inscribed in a bold, dashing hand, were the words, "For Peter Creighton—a master of mysteries—from October Copley."

"That's mighty nice of her," he told himself, putting it down. "Golly, what a woman! She has packed more life into each of her years than most men get in their three-score-and-ten."

The hour was early for his metropolitan standards.

He thought of the balcony outside his window, and forthwith carried a comfortable chair to that cool retreat. He had lighted a cigar and established himself contentedly before a low voice challenged him from the darkness to the right.

"So you have found your little veranda!"

"Hello, Miss Copley! You got one too?"

"Yes. I come out here nearly every evening for an hour before going to bed. I love to watch the stars."

"No dearth of them in these skies."

"If we could look beyond them we might read the Riddle of the Universe. I think we could—I think so!" Here was the undercurrent of sadness again, sounding through an odd intensity of tone. "Surely, there is something beyond them. There must be! What do you think?"

"I know there is. If you sat here long enough, Miss Copley, I believe your doubts would be set at rest."

"What do you mean? What is behind the stars?"

"The dawn," he told her seriously. "These windows must face due East." He mused briefly. "They also command a partial view of that kitchen garden, come to think of it! You didn't happen to see or hear any—last evening—"

"What a one-track mind!" lamented Miss Ocky. "No!"

They talked until very late.

XVII: An Arrest is Made

AT eleven o'clock the next morning, the ground-floor of the big house was again invaded by a heterogeneous collection of people drawn thither by the coroner's inquest into the death of Simon Varr. Some were there as witnesses or because they had a personal interest in the proceedings, some because they were part of the legal machinery, and many because they were driven by morbid curiosity. The Coroner, an alert, bewhiskered old gentleman named Merton, took possession of the big living-room and had one end of it fenced off with chairs the better to mark the dignified exclusiveness of his court.

As on the previous day, the end of the veranda around the corner from the front of the house escaped the notice of the invading horde. Creighton spent the early part of the morning there, after a solitary breakfast, reading the morning paper attentively. Barlow, the editor, had covered the story of the murder with a competent pencil. The account was graphic, lucid and comprehensive, a credit to himself and his paper. When Creighton had finished its careful perusal he was posted on many details of the case that sheer lack of time had prevented him from learning the day before. With a considerable degree of satisfaction, however, he noted that he had unearthed a fair amount of information that the industrious scribe had missed.

Only second in interest to the big story itself was the half-column on an inner page devoted to the jail-breaking exploit of Mr. Charles Maxon—which

would certainly have been largely featured at any other time. Some lesser scribe on Barlow's staff had been assigned to this minor item of news. He had gotten hold of the unfortunate Moody, and under the caption, "Der Jail Is Oudt" he had written a racy, humorous account of a Lady-Fair with Knock-out Drops, a Resourceful Romeo and a hoodwinked Jailer. It ended with the statement that Romeo and the Lady were still missing, and that a ticket agent on night duty at the railroad station had seen two muffled figures unostentatiously board the last car of the midnight train without the formality of buying tickets.

"That means they'll have had to pay on the train," mused Creighton, "and of course the conductor will remember to what point they bought transportation when the police get around to asking him. Um. Would a murderer leave a trail as clear as that? I think not!"

It still lacked half-an-hour of the time set for the inquest. Creighton was smoking a cigarette and mentally digesting the information gleaned from the newspaper when Jason Bolt, accompanied by Krech and Miss Ocky, came swooping down upon him.

"Developments!" said Jason, his face wreathed in smiles. "I've found out what Norvallis has up his sleeve. Want to know?"

"I certainly do," said Creighton. "How did you find out?"

"Small-town stuff," declared Bolt cheerfully. "You can't keep a thing dark in the country. Our local Chief of Police is sore as a pup because Norvallis, when he gave the paper the story yesterday, failed to give him credit for fixing the hour of the murder by the dry ground beneath the body. Steiner

—that's the chief—came to see me this morning at the office to make some inquiries about the fire the other night. He accepted a cigar, got to talking about his troubles—and didn't hesitate to tell me the county officers' theory when I asked him what it was."

"Charlie Maxon?" asked Creighton when Bolt paused for breath—and from the corner of his eye saw Miss Ocky give a little start.

"You've guessed it," admitted Jason a trifle disappointedly. "I confess I don't think much of their case, but Charlie Maxon is their choice. He broke jail just after ten o'clock and came up here. That is definitely proved to their satisfaction, at least, by footprints recognized as his in the soft earth beside Simon's body. They were identical with some he'd left when he came up here on an earlier tomato-swiping raid. Norvallis swore out a warrant yesterday afternoon and started a couple of sleuths on the trail of Maxon and his lady friend, and they were arrested early this morning in the village of Chiswick, about fifty miles down the line. What do you think of that?"

"What is the charge?"

"Indefinite. They're to be held on suspicion of being concerned in the murder. That's why I say it sounds like a weak case."

"How do they trace the dagger to Maxon?"

"He is supposed to have an accomplice." Bolt looked a little more serious. "Steiner was more cautious on that point—or else he was not so much in the know. There was a discharged clerk named Langhorn who accompanied Billy Graham to this house on the night of the robbery. Langhorn must have recognized the notebook in Simon's hand dur-

ing that interview, and it was common knowledge among the clerks in the tannery that it contained valuable matter. The police theory is that he took advantage of Simon's absence at the fire to sneak back to the house, enter the study and steal the book—using the dagger and carrying it off with him afterward. He was seen talking to a man on the evening of the murder at the corner of an alley behind the lock-up. The county crowd think that man was Maxon, that Maxon was two-thirds drunk at least, and that Langhorn gave him the knife and egged him on to kill Simon. That's the gist of it."

"Um. Why should Langhorn flirt with the hangman? Discharged clerks don't necessarily revenge themselves to that extent!"

"He wouldn't tell me if he could—and I don't believe he can!"

"There is something I don't understand," broke in Miss Ocky, frowning thoughtfully. "Can a possibly innocent man be held just on suspicion like that? Surely, Norvallis must have strong proofs."

"I may be doing him an injustice," answered Creighton quietly, "but I think I have discovered the reason for Mr. Norvallis' activities. I rather wondered why he was thrusting himself so eagerly into the investigation instead of leaving it to the detectives. Yesterday I saw a poster on a fence by the tannery and learned that he is up for County-Attorney at the coming State election!" He caught a flicker of comprehension in Jason's eye, but Miss Ocky and Krech looked blank. "Don't you see? Here's a murder—a notable murder—committed in his county a few weeks before election. He has to do something. Maxon obligingly implicates himself enough to warrant his being held. Norvallis

arrests him. He can easily juggle things along until the ballots have dropped in the box—meanwhile demonstrating that he's an active, zealous and conscientious officer!"

"You've hit it," declared Bolt. "He's that kind."

"But that's—*vile!*" cried Miss Ocky.

"We'll give him the benefit of one doubt," said Creighton. "He probably would not do that to a man he believed innocent; undoubtedly he is convinced that Maxon is guilty and will fight tooth-and-nail to convict."

"Well—is he right?" asked Bolt slowly. A dull red flushed his cheeks. "Did Maxon do it?"

"I'm confident that he did not," said Creighton. A pressure of his arm against his breast brought a crackle of paper and the comfortable assurance that his chip from the blade of the dagger was safe. "Don't press me for reasons yet, Mr. Bolt."

"I won't." Jason rose as Bates came around the corner to say the inquest had opened. "Take your time, sir, but get me that notebook!"

The proceedings went swiftly and smoothly from beginning to end. Whether or not he was a particularly good coroner—and Creighton felt some doubt of that—Merton was certainly expert in the technique of his job. He handled his witnesses capably, with deftness and dispatch, extracting facts from them with the easy grace of a headwaiter pulling corks, and each time a fact popped out he beamed benignly at his jury.

No mention was made of the police theory, and from the way Merton neatly headed off one or two witnesses who came close to trespassing on that forbidden ground, Creighton reckoned that Norvallis had persuaded him to mark time "in the interests of

justice." The crowd that had come for a thrill were rewarded by the tale of the black monk, most of which was told by Miss Ocky. Her soft, clear voice carried to every ear, and her cool, matter-of-fact tones seemed rather to accentuate the dramatic values of her testimony than otherwise. It was the highlight of the whole picture, more interesting even than the verdict with its orthodox tag of "person or persons unknown."

"Norvallis hasn't shown his hand," murmured Jason Bolt, who was sitting next to Creighton.

"It'll make a louder splash in the papers tomorrow," retorted the detective cynically.

He had taken care to seat himself at the beginning of the inquest in such a way that he could watch the faces of the spectators who had come to this macabre entertainment. There was so much to the case that was hopelessly dark to him that he dared miss no opportunity to seek something or somebody who might inject even a single ray of light into the murk. He knew that the crowd at any inquest was quite likely to include the very person or persons unknown mentioned in the verdict. He watched the crowd here with a sharp eye for any one who might display a deeper interest than that of the casual ambulance-chaser brand.

He spotted just one among those present who seemed worthy of closer attention. This was a strikingly handsome blond man, middle-aged and well-dressed, who occupied an inconspicuous seat in the farthest corner of the long room. He had about him an air of strained intensity as he leaned forward to follow every word of the testimony, particularly when Miss Ocky was giving hers, and he tugged nervously and continuously at a close-cropped mus-

tache. Creighton could see that his face was haggard and bore lines of worry—and he could see that an unmistakable look of relief came into his eyes as the jury returned its open verdict.

“Interesting,” said the detective to himself, and touched Bolt on the arm as the man hurried from the room at the conclusion of the proceedings. “Who is that fair-haired chap just going out?”

“His name is Leslie Sherwood,” answered Jason promptly. “He’s a native of these parts but he has been out in the great world making lots of money. He has just returned and opened up the old Sherwood place, which has been closed since his father’s death a few months ago. Why?”

Creighton was spared a reply by the appearance of a dapper, sharp little old gentleman who came up and greeted Bolt by his first name.

“Hello, Judge!” Jason turned with a gesture of his hand. “I want you to meet Mr. Peter Creighton, of New York. This is Judge Taylor, Mr. Creighton, who has always handled our legal affairs and managed somehow to keep us out of jail! Judge, Creighton is here to investigate that robbery of the other evening when Simon’s notebook was stolen.”

“*And* the dagger that killed him!” added Taylor significantly. “Glad to meet you, Mr. Creighton. I trust your inquiry will be successful.” He jerked his head backward. “What did you think of this inquest?”

“Nicely stage-managed,” said the detective, and an appreciative twinkle lit the lawyer’s eyes. “May I have a chat with you sometime, Judge?”

“Whenever you please. Jason will show you my office.”

“Hello! Who is this?” Creighton was facing

the door from the hall, to which the other two men had their backs, and he was the first of them to notice a tall, prepossessing young man who hurried into the room. Behind him came Miss Ocky, looking pleased, and after her Krech, hunting for the detective from whom he had become separated. "Is it—?"

"Copley!" cried Jason Bolt and Judge Taylor with one voice. They greeted the newcomer warmly, but with the subdued sympathy suitable to the occasion. "When did you learn about this?" added Bolt.

"This morning's papers. I came as fast as I could." He spun around toward Miss Ocky. "My mother—?"

"Sleeping," answered his aunt. "It has been a shock, but you have no need to worry about her. Don't think of waking her up; I know you must want to go to her, but wait."

"This is a terrible business," said the young man to Bolt and the lawyer. He was yet unaware of Creighton, who had withdrawn slightly into the background. "I only know what I've read in the papers. As I came in just now I heard somebody say the inquest had drawn a blank. Is that so?"

"Yes. It is a complicated affair, Copley," answered Bolt. "It will take some time to tell you everything that has happened—"

"We'll go into it later, then. Just tell me now if everything possible is being done to identify the man who killed my father. That is the most important business before us. Have the police any clues?"

"I believe so, but they are saying little. On our own account, I have engaged this gentleman here—Mr. Creighton—to conduct an independent inquiry. Creighton, this is Mr. Varr's son, of whom you have heard."

Copley sent a keen look at the detective, then held out his hand.

"Glad to meet you—and very glad that Mr. Bolt has engaged your services. It is the very thing I would have wished. I have no confidence in the local authorities."

"That appears to make it unanimous," said Creighton, grinning. "Really, I'm beginning to wonder if these county fellows can be as stupid as they're reputed." He glanced at Jason Bolt. "Suppose I take Mr. Varr into the study here and give him a résumé of events to date? Somebody must, and I know the details better than any one else, perhaps."

There was a chorus of relieved approval from Bolt, Taylor and Miss Ocky and a quick nod of assent from Copley.

"I must have a talk with you, too, Copley, as soon as possible," added Jason Bolt. "It's hard to have to intrude business—"

"Oh!" interrupted the young man, and suddenly ran his fingers through his hair with a distraught gesture. "I'm in the deuce of a jam—! Aunt Ocky, when is the funeral?"

"We were waiting to hear from you. Now that you're here—shall we say to-morrow noon?"

"Very well. After that I must catch the one-thirty to New York." He shrugged his shoulders at Bolt's disappointed grunt. "It can't be helped, sir! And I'll be busy every minute until I leave. Are you sure that you need me after all?" He looked at the old lawyer who was eyeing him thoughtfully. "Judge Taylor, you had charge of my father's will, didn't you? Would it be improper

for you to tell me whether or not I've inherited his interest in the tannery?"

"I'll risk the impropriety under the circumstances," said Taylor slowly, breaking a little silence that followed the question. "Yes, you have inherited a controlling interest without any restriction." He hesitated cautiously. "I'm assuming that no other will exists—I cannot believe there is any."

"In that case—you and I are partners, Mr. Bolt." Copley held out his hand rather bashfully. "You'll have a fearful lot to teach me, but you'll find me willing to learn." He continued more incisively. "I believe the first thing to do is to get that strike settled and the men to work. They'll listen to you, Mr. Bolt, if you ask them to return pending our decision to raise wages and improve conditions. Another thing—can you persuade Graham to stay with us?"

"I believe so—now," said Bolt slowly.

"The tannery must remain closed to-morrow, the day of the funeral. I'd like to see it open up the morning after at the usual hour."

"It will," said Jason flatly. "Leave it to me."

"That's what I want to do, for a fortnight anyway. After that you will find me ready to pull my weight in the boat." The young man turned to the others. "Aunt Ocky, you'll let me know, won't you, as soon as my mother wakes up? Come on, Mr. Creighton; I'm anxious to hear all you can tell me." He walked off to the study without waiting to see if the detective followed.

Creighton did not, for the moment. Bolt and Krech were leaving, and so was Judge Taylor. The detective had a few words with his friend as they

followed the other two along the hall to the piazza, while Miss Ocky went up to her sister's room.

"What did you think of him?" asked Krech.

"Haven't thought much yet."

"He ought to be a pleasant change for Jason. He'll be open to reason, yet he'll have ideas of his own. Did you notice how he snapped into the business of getting work started again?"

"I noticed it."

"An up-and-coming lad," said Krech. "He couldn't have done it better if he'd been expecting the job."

Creighton glanced at the speaker quickly, but the big man's face was as ingenuous as a child's. They dropped the subject as they came up with the others.

When he had bidden them *au revoir*, the detective went to the small study, where he found Copley Varr restlessly pacing the short fairway between the door and his father's desk. The young man welcomed him with a gesture of relief.

"Thought you were never coming," he said, though not rudely. "If I can't see my mother yet, I'm in a hurry to—to attend to some other matters."

"Is an interview with William Graham one of them?" asked Creighton quietly as they sat down. He caught the sharp look that Copley sent him. "While digging into the history of this case it was inevitable that I should discover something of your private affairs. I will ask you to believe that I do not violate confidences—even though I have to force them at times."

"That's all right. You're a detective, aren't you?"

"I try to be!" smiled Creighton.

"Well, it's no use employing a detective and then

cramping his style by refusing him information. I understand that."

"Good. We'll get along beautifully. Will you tell me, please, why you are obliged to return to New York? Is the reason—Miss Graham?"

"Not any more." For the first time since he had entered the house, Copley smiled a little. "It is Mrs. Varr, now. We were married yesterday morning in New York." The smile vanished abruptly. "And my father—scarcely cold! I won't forget the shock I got from the papers this morning if I live to be a hundred."

"Got a shock, did you?" repeated Creighton to himself, yet the boy's words had rung true. "If you're ready, Mr. Varr, I'll give you the story of what happened up to your father's death. I'll be brief."

At that, it was a lengthy narrative. It took more than an hour to relate, an hour in which Copley Varr did not once take his eyes from the detective's face. His gaze was expressionless; Creighton, returning it with interest, strove vainly to pierce that inscrutable veil to see what lay behind.

"And there is no definite clue to the murderer?" asked Copley when Creighton finished. "Is the Maxon theory sound?"

"I think not. As for clues—well, such indications as I have turned up are too vague to be termed that."

"Do you suspect any one?"

"That question is out of order, Mr. Varr."

"Oh. Will you tell me then, in a general way, where those indications you mention seem to point?"

"In a general way, yes." Creighton meditated. "They point to a person who hated your father, who

sympathized with the striking tanners, who was wealthy enough to supply them with money, either from sympathy or to further his grudge, a person of some education, familiar with local history and imaginative enough to adapt the costume of a legendary monk to a perfect disguise. Last, a person who was sufficiently familiar with this house to stage a burglary as bold as it was successful."

Copley Varr was pale as this hypothetical portrait was limned. His eyes now avoided the detective's.

"That description might fit a—a number of people," he said.

"Oh, yes. It's very vague. Now, I can ask a question that you mustn't; do *you* suspect any one?"

"N-no."

"Come! are you weakening already about giving me information?"

"Suspicion—if I had any—is not fact!"

"Quibbles won't get us anywhere. I won't press you further to voice your suspicion—right now. In the meantime, I'll plod along with my investigation on the obvious lines."

"Obvious? I suppose they are to you, Mr. Creighton, but I do not see a single point of attack. Will you tell me what you plan to do, or is that also taboo?"

"I'm going to make a list of all the people that description might fit and then eliminate them one by one as circumstances dictate. I suppose competent alibis will let most of 'em out. Yes, I guess I'll have quite a fine assortment of alibis at the end." The detective was speaking easily, good-humoredly, and his voice was elaborately casual as he added: "By the way, where were you the night of the burglary from ten to twelve?"

Copley Varr started violently and his face crimsoned. For a long minute he did not speak but sat staring angrily at his inquisitor. He clenched his hands as though ready to leap on the detective. Then, slowly, his fingers relaxed, the color faded from his cheeks and the anger from his eyes. Creighton watched the metamorphosis with approval; if he could get the best of his temper like that, would he have been likely to lose it to the extent of committing murder? Improbable!

"I was in the editorial rooms of the *News* from ten-thirty until quarter to twelve, when I left to catch the midnight train to New York. At least three men connected with the paper will bear me out."

"That's bully!" said Creighton. "The crowd on my list will be in luck if they do half as well. One thing more, Mr. Varr, and then I'm off to real work. Was William Graham in the habit of coming to this house?"

Again Copley jumped, but this time with the air of shrinking from a blow rather than delivering one. His voice, when it came, was hoarse.

"Don't ask me that—now!"

"Um. Yes, it's rather a tough question—new father-in-law, new bride and all that! You needn't answer it, Mr. Varr!"

"Plainer than you have already, my son!" he added to himself as he left the room. "William Graham—to the bar!"

Creighton was light on his feet and invariably wore rubber-soled shoes—not, as he had been obliged to explain to Krech aforetime, because he was trying to be the complete pussy-footed sleuth, but because he really preferred them to leather. The result, how-

ever, whether designed or not, was to make him as soundless in his movements as a panther.

He slipped noiselessly along the hall to the front door, his thoughts busy with what he had just learned, his immediate intention to go to town for the talk he had promised himself with Judge Taylor. Lawyers often could throw light on an affair of this kind if they chose to; what if there were some secret, unsuspected page in Simon Varr's life—?

As he put on his hat and stepped out of the front door, he heard the low hum of voices from the cozy corner at the end of the piazza. He wondered who it might be, and curiosity turned his steps in that direction. Instead of turning the corner, however, he halted abruptly when he heard his own name spoken by unmistakable accents.

"Where is Mr. Creighton, do you know?"

"He's in the study with Master Copley. Do you wish to speak to him, Miss Ocky?"

"No. Has he had any conversation with you yet, Bates?"

"No, Miss Ocky; nothing special."

"He probably will, though. It struck me, Bates, that you might inadvertently mention our little talk of the other day if I didn't warn you. I don't think that would be advisable."

"Nor do I, Miss Ocky! I was only afraid you might let it out yourself!"

"It would be a pity to put notions in his head," continued Miss Ocky calmly. "I must say, Mr. Creighton seems to be unusually sensible, but you can never tell which way a detective will jump."

"They're worse'n cats!" agreed the old butler.

XVIII: Some Old Men Are Out

THERE was a tinkle of silver and china suggestive of the butler picking up a tray and preparing to depart, so Creighton fled from the vicinage as softly as the furry felines to which Bates had spitefully compared him. A smile played around the corners of his mouth. Utterly shameless, he reminded himself that if listeners hear no good of themselves, they also occasionally hear much that is valuable. So Bates and Miss Ocky were in conspiracy to conceal from him some conversation they had had! Um. It would be funny if he couldn't pry the truth out of one of them; mentally, he girded up his loins for the fray.

The immediate effect of what he had overheard was an alteration in his plans for the balance of the afternoon. He wanted to see Judge Taylor for more than one reason, but his brief essay in eavesdropping had served to remind him of a chore neglected nearer home. The servants. He must question them, painstakingly and at length, on the chance that one or more of them might have heard or noticed something that would bring him a step closer to the truth.

Copley Varr had gone upstairs, summoned to his mother's bedside by Janet Mackay who was temporarily in attendance on the stricken Lucy. That left the study clear for Creighton who immediately possessed himself of it and touched the bell for Bates. The old man appeared presently, gave an attentive ear to the detective's brief statement of his intentions, and answered on behalf of himself and

the staff that all would be glad to assist Mr. Creighton in every possible way.

"The main essential is perfect frankness," said the detective.

"Yes, indeed, sir, I quite understand that," said the butler, a trifle too promptly. "It's wrong to hold anything back."

"I'll begin with the cook. I had a few words with her yesterday, just enough to learn she's nobody's fool. She's good-hearted, too—you can tell it by the layer of fat on the ribs of that Angora I've seen about." Creighton's eyes were laughing behind the shell-rimmed glasses. "Did it ever occur to you, Bates, that you can learn a lot about the cook by looking at the cat?"

"No, sir, it never did," said Bates, smiling faintly.

"It never did to me, either, until just this minute," admitted the detective frankly, "but I dare say there's a lot in it. Anyway, ask her to come here, please, and tell her I won't keep her long from her work."

Thus he played upon the sensibilities of his witnesses after a fashion whose worth he had demonstrated frequently in the past. He had put Bates a little more at his ease and to that extent weakened his defenses if it became necessary to startle him into speaking the truth, and he had sent a bouquet of flattering phrases to the cook which he confidently counted on Bates to deliver with his summons. That the butler had indeed done so was apparent the moment the cook appeared, her fat red face wreathed in smiles. A cross, recalcitrant woman who had sorely tried the patience of Mr. Norvallis the day before was an angel of sweetness as she responded to Creighton's inquisition.

Unfortunately, she did not have anything of value to offer in repayment for his studied politeness. Hers was the most prosaic of lives. She rose in the morning, cooked all day and went to bed, to rise and cook again. She knew nothing of what went on in the front part of the house, and Bates was the most close-mouthed butler she had ever worked with; he never opened his head about what he heard in the dining-room.

That let her out, and Creighton dismissed her with a request that she send in Betty Blake.

When she had recovered from a preliminary attack of nervousness, the pretty young housemaid unexpectedly produced information that gave Creighton furiously to think, for he reawakened an idea that had been present, but dormant, in his brain since his talk with Copley. It reminded him of a chance remark made by Jason Bolt to the effect that Langhorn had accompanied Graham when the latter came to see Varr, for Betty described how in passing through the hall on her way to bed she had seen the tannery manager "quarreling with Mr. Varr in his study."

"Sure they were quarreling, Betty?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They were both angry and excited."

"That was the night of the fire? The night of the robbery?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were on your way to bed—do you know what time it was?"

"Just past ten, sir,—or maybe half-past."

"That's near enough."

After a few more questions he let her go, telling her to ask Janet Mackay to join him in the study at

her first opportunity. While he waited for the "tall, gaunt nondescript" to appear he contemplated the case of William Graham, and sitting in Varr's chair he came slowly to the same dark suspicions that Varr had entertained.

"Graham saw the notebook here, and knew what it was. He could use what was in it—none better. According to the watchman, Nelson, Graham sympathized with the strikers even if he ranked with the bosses. He was a bit the worse for liquor when he was here that evening, in the mood to think of some wild act and perhaps drunk enough to carry out the thought. He had time to slip down and set that fire, then come back when it was under way and sneak into the house. Granting that he used the dagger because it was handy, why did he carry it away with him? Was he thinking of murder already? Was he cool enough to figure that a weapon taken from Varr's own house would not readily be traced to him? Can't answer these questions—now!" Creighton lighted a cigarette and wrinkled his brow. "Graham has plenty of intelligence, from all accounts. He is clever enough to have thought of an effective disguise, and he probably knew the legend of the monk, since his daughter showed it to Miss Copley in a book belonging to them. Um. Is he the man I'm looking for?"

He did not have time for further reflection before the entrance of Miss Janet Mackay, once of Aberdeen, now a citizen of the world and the devoted henchwoman of Miss October Copley. She inclined her head stiffly in reply to his pleasant greeting, refused a chair, and remained standing in front of him, hands folded across her flat stomach, her cold eyes fixed on him through her cheap, steel spectacles.

She was taller and gaunter and more angular than ever. Creighton chuckled inwardly. If Miss Copley was October, then this was January, or at best late December!

It did not take him long to discover that he had drawn another perfect blank. Trying to extract information from Janet Mackay was about as profitable as trying to squeeze water from a handful of Sahara sand. She knew nothing, and said less. After ten minutes of fruitless effort he gave it up.

"It's clear you know nothing!"

"I know the world is well rid of a selfish deevil."

"Tut, tut! Have you no respect for the dead?"

"Not a whit for him, dead or alive."

"How is Mrs. Varr?"

"Resting easier."

"Is her son with her still?"

"He went off somewhere an hour ago."

"That's all, then. Thank you."

She stalked away, head in air, stiff as any ramrod.

"Now for Bates," muttered the detective, and touched the bell. "I'll swear he's got something on his mind!"

In this surmise he was perfectly correct. The old butler did have something that was troubling him—a matter so grave and serious that they did not finish discussing it until the study was dusk and sounds from the dining-room indicated that Betty Blake was helpfully setting the table in the unduly prolonged absence of its regular attendant. When their talk was ended, it was the detective who wore a perplexed expression, while Bates had lost the troubled, almost haunted look that had been in his eyes since the death of Simon Varr.

Creighton hurried to his room to prepare for din-

ner, and when he glanced from his window he observed for the first time that the weather was about to exhibit itself in a petulant, ill-humored mood. Black storm-clouds were rolling up, a chill, gusty wind was rattling the windows and a heavy spat of rain dashed against the glass as he turned away. It would be a nasty night.

Miss Ocky remarked on the fact when she joined him in the dining-room. She looked unhappy.

"I hate cold," she told him. "Had enough of it in my life. I am going to have a fire lighted in the living-room. If you want to talk to me this evening you'll have to put up with having your toes toasted."

He assured her that toasted toes were his favorite delicacy. Then he nodded to a third place set at the table and raised his eyebrows.

"For Copley, but he hasn't turned up."

"He may be dining with his new father-in-law," suggested the detective. "Or with Jason Bolt, talking business."

She did not pursue the subject, but later, when they were seated before a crackling fire in the living-room, she attacked him briskly.

"I haven't talked with either you or him since your interview in the library. Was—was it satisfactory? Please tell me."

"With all the pleasure in the world. The interview *was* satisfactory—and I think I know what you mean by that! He accounted for his movements on the night before last with unimpeachable accuracy."

"Thank heaven!" said Miss Ocky. "I don't mean that I had any suspicion of him, but I'm glad if he has cleared himself in your eyes."

"He has, perfectly."

"I wish I knew what your plan of campaign is to

be! You half promised to let me see just how a detective works, you know. What are you going to do first?"

"Suppose I don't know myself?" He paused to light her cigarette and one for himself, then added deliberately: "You can't always tell which way a detective will jump; they're worse'n cats."

"Oh!" cried Miss Ocky, and choked on a puff of smoke. "Eavesdropper!" she gasped.

"I didn't go for to do it. But if you *will* have these little intimate chats on a piazza without looking around the corner—! Now, you can tell me what it was all about."

"I'll tell you first that it's a mistake to take overheard remarks too seriously." Miss Ocky, recovered from smoke and emotion, smiled at the fire. "Once, when I was a little girl of seven, I got an awful scare that way—right in this very room, on a wild stormy night like this! I had come in to say good night to my father and mother, who were sitting before a fire as we are now. Just as I left the room, I heard my mother say to him, 'The old man is out to-night!' Unless you were a nervous, high-strung brat yourself, you can't imagine the effect of that on me. I crept off to bed shivering, and lay awake half the night. Every time the wind shook my windows, I pictured some monstrous, hoary-headed creature trying to get in and gobble me up!" She laughed a little. "It gives me a grue to think of it even yet. I discovered the explanation of the phrase the next day. Can you guess it?"

"No. Another local legend, perhaps?"

"Nothing half so thrilling." She pointed to a high shelf above the mantelpiece. "There is the answer!"

Creighton followed the direction of her finger and smiled. On the shelf stood one of those miniature Swiss chalets so popular in drawing-rooms a generation ago. Two little figurines, a young woman and an old man, operating on barometric principles, emerged from the front door in turn as the weather indications were fair or stormy. At this moment the old man was well out.

"Enough to scare any child to death," he admitted. "Now—"

"But tame when explained, like lots of overheard things. Once when I was staying with a Chinese family in Pekin—"

"Where did you get the idea," inquired Creighton mildly, "that I was fond of red-herring? As a matter-of-fact, I've always hated it."

"Mmph!" said Miss Ocky, and made a face at him. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"You are probably aware that I had a long talk with Bates this afternoon. He told me much that was interesting—but I'd like *your* version of that conversation which you felt shouldn't be repeated to me."

"I wish I'd kept still about it," sighed Miss Ocky repentantly. "Now you'll probably magnify it out of all proportion. You see, I've known old Bates ever since I was a youngster, and we've always been good friends. He got in the habit years ago of bringing his troubles to me and talking them over—'blowing off steam,' he always called it! That was how we happened to have that talk a few days ago. Simon had been unusually querulous even for him—and he could be very trying at times. Bates had suffered a long while in silence, and when he got a chance to air his grievance to me he—he blew off

quite a lot of steam first and last! He chiefly resented Simon's attitude toward Lucy, and I couldn't blame him there. One thing led to another, and that's how we came finally to agree that the world would be a brighter little planet if Simon no longer lived on it." Miss Ocky shrugged her shoulders. "The sort of thing that means nothing at the time but sounds like the very devil after a man is found murdered!"

"Yes, it does," answered Creighton gravely. "I had no idea you two had been contemplating the possible death of Simon Varr. That is not at all a pleasant bit of news."

"You—you had no idea! You had no—!" Miss Ocky sat up very straight. "Didn't Bates tell you that?" she demanded crisply.

"No. He told me much, but he wouldn't tell me the subject of your conversation with him because he'd promised you he wouldn't. He was adamant. That's why I've had to get it out of you."

"Oh!" She slumped again into her chair. "You—you *creature!*"

"I know," he said apologetically. "But what's a man to do if people hold out on him?"

"I suppose," said Miss Ocky in a small voice, "this is a judgment on me for wondering how a detective works!"

"Possibly. Did he make any threats?"

"No!" said Miss Ocky.

"Um. Would you tell me if he did?"

"N-no," said the lady.

"It makes a fellow long for the days of the Spanish Inquisition," said Creighton, addressing the fireplace. He added darkly, "There are several per-

sons around that I could enjoy putting on a cozy little rack!"

"It's no use being bloodthirsty," she informed him. "As for Bates—! Oh, I do wish you'd stop getting ideas into your head!"

"I can't. It's the sort of head that gets 'em!"

"Well, I wish you'd draw the line at Bates! Why, I've known him all my life!"

"There is always some one to say that about any criminal. Always some one to say it isn't possible. The awful thing is, it is possible."

"But—Bates! How could any one associate the idea of murder with that gentle, harmless old man? Ridiculous!"

"He was devoted to your father because Mr. Copley stood by him when he didn't know where to turn. He had been in trouble. Did you know that?"

"Vaguely—from Bates himself. Why? What trouble was it?"

"Starvation. He had difficulty finding work because no one wished to employ a man who had just been pardoned out of a penitentiary where he was serving a life sentence for murder."

There was a brief silence.

"It can't be!" she whispered at length. "Not Bates! It can't be *true*!"

"He was married in those days, and the other man was guilty of breaking up the home. Extenuating circumstances, you see. He was lucky enough to have a lawyer who didn't lose interest when the prison swallowed him, and he brought the matter to the attention of a new Governor who pardoned Bates after he had served five years. Your father happened on him when he was near the end of his

rope, gave him sanctuary and helped him bury the past. That is his story."

"How did he come to tell you?"

"I persuaded him to. I've noticed ever since I've been in the house that he was shaky, nervous—*worried*. Three times out of five, when you see a servant in that condition following a mysterious crime, you can look for the explanation in a shady past. I tackled him from that basis. He didn't need much urging—in fact, he told me he had half made up his mind to come to me with the story of his own accord. I believe him. He had been in mortal terror lest the police discover it." Creighton paused in order to study her serious, thoughtful face. "He asked me to tell you this."

"He did!"

"He seems devoted to you. He had wanted to tell you himself, but could never quite find the courage. He has wanted you to know the truth about him, but has never been able to forget the way others used to receive it. He has taken some hard knocks."

"Poor soul. Poor lonely soul!" Her voice was tender.

"I thought you'd feel that way about it! You'll find an opportunity to make him understand, I suppose? Probably he won't want to talk much about it, but you—you could give him a friendly pat on the arm or—or something like that, couldn't you?"

Miss Ocky suddenly turned and looked at him with eyes that were shining through unshed tears.

"You're a queer man! You can sit there suspecting him of murder and still want me to be kind to him!"

"Have I said anything about suspecting him?" demanded the detective with almost a touch of asperity.

"You accused me of suspecting Copley last evening and I had to remind you that he'd probably turn up with a perfectly good alibi—and he did! If there's a pessimist in human nature sitting around here, it isn't I!"

"Mmph. All right, little sunshine!"

"I don't care anything about suspicion. I want proof. Until I get it, I try to preserve an open mind."

"Oh. Well, that's an improvement over Mr. Norvallis, I must admit!" Miss Ocky turned her eyes back to the fire. "What you've told me about Bates has given me quite a—a shock, Mr. Creighton. I won't drag any more red-herrings around, but can't we *please* talk of something else?"

He cheerfully and promptly consented. They talked a while on every subject under the sun except the death of Simon Varr, and they were both a trifle disconcerted when a wild shrieking of brakes and a heavy step on the veranda announced the arrival of Herman Krech, who would tolerate no other topic until he left at eleven.

It was just short of midnight when Creighton, sound asleep, was roused by a discreet but persistent tapping on his door. He rolled out of bed, struck a match, opened the door and discovered Copley Varr, grinning broadly.

"I've got my father-in-law's blessing!" he announced.

"I congratulate you." The detective blinked. "Excuse me, but I was with the angels! Did you call me back just to tell me this?"

"No. I thought you ought to know that we were a pair of nuts this noon. Mr. Graham was holding pat hands in a poker game during the fire and rob-

bery, and he was presiding at a lodge-meeting in Hambleton the night—the night before last!”

“With umpty-umph fellow-lodgers to prove it. Um. Touch ’em and they vanish!”

“What?”

“I mean, I’d like to find a prospect that would stay put for a while at least. As it is now, the moment I look sideways at any one he promptly trots out an alibi.”

“Like I did to-day! I see. Trying for a detective, eh?”

“Very trying,” said Peter Creighton. “Good night!”

He shut the door and presently rejoined the angels.

XIX: Among Those Present

AFTER that midnight report from Copley Varr, ten days passed without the occurrence of a single distinctive event. They were not empty days, however, for Peter Creighton, who continued patiently to cast hither and yon very much like an Indian brave seeking the trail of an enemy warrior.

The full scope of his investigation was not apparent to the naked eye, as Krech, who was chafing at the lack of developments and inclined to accuse his friend of masterly inactivity, discovered one afternoon. They were taking a stroll in the twilight at the detective's insistence, and met a roughly-dressed individual with a cap on the back of his head and a short pipe stuck in his mouth. He was loitering by the side of the road, and to Krech's surprise, Creighton excused himself and joined the man for a brief chat.

"Who's your rough-neck pal?" he demanded curiously as the detective came back and suggested a return home. "His face is familiar but I can't just place him."

"You once bought a painting from him when he was posing as an artist!" Creighton chuckled. "He reminded me of it just now; said you're the only connoisseur who ever really appreciated his work!"

"Gee Joseph! One of your men!"

"Fellow named Latimer."

"What is he doing around here?"

"Covering the tannery end of this affair. Latimer's an artist in more ways than one. When I

told him what I wanted, he got two books on modern methods in tanning from the New York Public Library, studied them on the train coming up, and landed a job as easy as you please when Graham and Bolt started to replace the old hands who had left. Snappy work!"

"Gosh. And I thought you were investigating this case single-handed! You're a foxy guy at times, Creighton. Has Latimer learned anything useful?"

"Not to me, I'm sorry to say. The few facts he has turned up seem merely to darken the outlook for Charlie Maxon, that unfortunate prisoner-pent. He appears to be quite as bad an egg as Mr. Norvallis believes."

"Do you suppose Norvallis is making any progress with *his* case?" inquired Krech.

"He's sitting pretty with the voters!" said Creighton shortly. "By the way, neither Bolt nor Graham knows who Latimer is. Don't tell 'em."

"I won't," promised the big man.

He did, however, after the fashion of husbands, tell his wife that evening after dinner. They were standing together on the front steps of their host's house, having been persuaded with no great difficulty to lengthen their stay by at least another week, and Krech had just lighted a cigar to keep him company while he strolled over to the Varr home.

"You might have known Peter Creighton is never as idle as he looks," commented Jean Krech, when she had listened to the tale of Latimer. "He probably has a dozen more irons in the fire that you don't dream of. I suppose you're going over there now?"

"Uh-huh. There's always a chance he may have some news."

"Well, it's all right for you to drop in and ask,"

said Jean calmly. "But—don't linger, melove, don't linger!"

"Huh? What do you mean, don't linger? Why not?"

"You blind old goose! Has it ever struck you that Creighton is a rather lonely man?"

"Lonely?" Then the significance of her question suddenly hit him between the eyes. "Gee Joseph! Are you trying to promote a romance between him and Miss Ocky?"

"Precious little promotion is required," she corrected him. "It's as plain as the nose on your face how things are going." She laughed when her husband in his bewilderment reached up and felt of the promontory indicated. "Yes, it's very plain!"

"But they've only known each other a week or so!"

"What of it? They're old enough to know their own minds—both in the early forties. Neither of them has ever had a love-affair as far as we know; probably it hits them harder and quicker when they're like that!"

"Maybe you're right." Krech reflected deeply, and then nodded his head. "Suits me! I like her immensely, and of course he'd be a whole lot happier if he were married. Any man is."

"Oh, *thank* you!" cried his beautiful wife softly. She slipped a hand beneath his elbow and gave his massive arm an affectionate squeeze while her blue eyes twinkled up at his. "Is um itty-witty baby happy, then?"

"Shut up," commanded Mr. Krech with intense dignity. "Don't go cooing at me—not where any one might hear you, anyway!"

An unprejudiced observer of the trend of events

at the house on the hill must have admitted that Mrs. Krech had considerable grounds for her romantic suspicions. Twice during the ten days aforementioned Creighton was obliged to go to New York and spend half a day on business that would not be denied, and each time he returned bearing books and candy and a vast quantity of assorted and exotic fruits for which Miss Ocky had expressed a casual longing and which the marts of Hambleton could not provide. On the first occasion he pretended they were for Lucy Varr, still confined to her room, but on the second he abandoned pretense.

Then there was the incident of the picnic, sponsored by Miss Ocky. They took their lunch and plunged into the wilderness of hills that lay to the north of Hambleton, their destination the cave that was reputed to have sheltered the legendary monk. It was Miss Ocky's suggestion that in the haunts of the old monk they might come upon some traces of the new, if that imaginative imitator had carried his masquerade to the extent of using his predecessor's quarters, and Creighton, without the flutter of an eyelash, agreed that nothing was more likely. They found the cave—or some cave—but nothing else. Their disappointment weighed lightly upon them, and the detective enjoyed the day with all the artless abandon of a schoolboy playing hooky.

Even more significant than the picnic was the *pilau*. Miss Ocky had described this supposedly delectable dish to Creighton at some length, and the next day was impelled to possess herself of the kitchen and compose a *pilau* such as she swore appeared daily on the tables of the first epicures of Constantinople. However that might be, affairs are approaching a crisis when a woman is seized with a

desire to demonstrate her culinary accomplishments to a man.

The *pilau* was an amazing dish. At table with them during those days was a very pale, very thin young man with gold pince-nez, fair hair and a painfully self-effacing manner, who had been quartered on the house by Judge Taylor for the purpose of documenting a vast accumulation of papers in Simon Varr's study. He took a mouthful of the *pilau*, started slightly, and took a second to make sure his senses had not deceived him about the first. Ten minutes later, the closest approach to any emotion that he ever revealed was visible on his face as Creighton sent back his plate for a third helping.

If Miss Ocky noticed his tactless expression of awe—and she rarely missed anything so obvious—it probably did nothing to raise the young man in her esteem. She frankly disliked him.

"That Merrill!" she grumbled to Creighton when they were by themselves after dinner. "A perfect imposition on the part of Judge Taylor! Of course I couldn't very well refuse under the circumstances, but I'll be glad when we lose him!"

"He must have nearly finished his work," Creighton consoled her. "After all, he's harmless. Why does he annoy you?"

"I don't know," was the conclusively feminine reply. "He just does."

On the afternoon of the eleventh day after the death of Simon Varr, Creighton had a chat with Jason Bolt in the office of the tannery that was in no-wise remarkable except for the odd timeliness of the detective's farewell observation. Jason had asked him if he was satisfied with the progress made to date or whether he was discouraged by the present

lull which so closely resembled stagnation. Could he say when the mystery might take some definite turn toward solution?

"Ask me when the millennium is coming and be done with it," said Creighton rather plaintively, wondering why so many people seemed to credit detectives with oracular powers. "If Norvallis has the right pig by the ear, Maxon may break down, turn State's evidence and hang his accomplice. That's one possibility. Another—we may as well face it—is that this case will go to swell the great army of unsolved mysteries." He hesitated, then added, "There's a third possibility, of course."

"What is it?"

"The chance that a break will come from some totally unexpected quarter when we've all but given up hope. I've seen that happen a score of times. There's no predicting it—no counting on it. But when it comes—then look out! A case that has been placid and smooth as a mill pond will suddenly develop the characteristics of a maelstrom!" He smiled encouragement at the troubled Jason. "If one starts in this case, we may reasonably expect that its gurgitations will yield us that missing notebook if nothing more."

He was on foot that afternoon by choice, for he had long held that a daily walk is the best exercise for a man whose profession does not in itself provide him with much physical activity. He preferred it to gymnasium stuff, too; a man can think deeply while walking with perfect safety, if he avoids traffic, whereas the hospitals are full of misguided gentlemen who have committed the error of thinking deeply on some other subject while engaged, say, in "skinning the cat."

He had much to make him thoughtful these days. He was not at all satisfied with the situation in this Varr case, though he refrained from revealing his pessimism to others, and was reluctantly coming to fear that Norvallis had indeed gotten the jump on him—and jumped in the right direction. The possibility irritated him. He wished to clear up this murder himself more than he had ever wished for anything in his life. Wasn't Miss Ocky waiting confidently for him to do just that?

The intrusion of her name into his thoughts turned them into a new channel. He knew now that before he dropped his personal supervision of this case, before he left Hambleton for New York to attend to matters which were pressing there, he would have to ask Miss October Copley one of the most important questions he had ever asked in the course of a career devoted mostly to inquisitions. The prospect gave him a shivery feeling up and down his spine!

He walked briskly up the short-cut through the woods and came out at the end of the kitchen garden, now associated with a grimmer business than the growing of vegetables. It was due to his swift pace that he was in the open, in plain view, before he noticed two figures seated on the big granite boulder near the tomato-patch. He would have retreated to the obscurity of the trees and watched that interview if Miss Ocky had not spied him and risen instantly from her seat on the rock.

"Come here!" she called. "The very man we want!"

He walked over to them, and Miss Ocky's companion, a tall, handsome, fair-haired man, stood up to acknowledge the impending introduction. He

looked pale and worn, more haggard even than that morning at the inquest.

"Mr. Creighton—Mr. Leslie Sherwood," said Miss Ocky quickly. "You haven't met each other yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't *met* Mr. Sherwood," acknowledged the detective, accenting the verb very slightly.

"But you've been on my track!" said Sherwood, smiling rather nervously. "My valet was shrewd enough to suspect the man who scraped an acquaintance with him and showed so much interest in discovering my whereabouts on the night of Simon Varr's murder! He followed his new acquaintance one afternoon and saw him report to you."

"You appear to be more fortunate than I in the intelligence of your followers," said Creighton rather glumly. "I'm glad, though, to have this matter brought into the open." He glanced at Miss Ocky and back to Sherwood. "May I speak frankly, or shall we adjourn to the house by our two selves?"

"I have nothing to conceal from Miss Copley," answered Sherwood, flushing slightly. "As a matter of fact, I've just been making a full statement to her of my actions that evening and she had just advised me strongly to consult you when you suddenly appeared."

"Excellent advice. I'll explain my curiosity first, though. During the course of my investigation I've had to poke up a lot of gossip and more or less ancient history, and some of it related to you. According to my information you were once—attentive—to Miss Lucy Copley. You left, and she married Simon Varr. You returned, and Simon Varr, who had not proved a kind husband, is presently murdered. I had already noted your agitation at the inquest, and

without entertaining definite views, I still thought it advisable to learn what I could about you."

"Quite naturally," admitted Sherwood with a certain urbanity, though his color deepened. "I can see now that you had some reason to regard me askance. However, the fact that you are already so well posted in my affairs has its consoling virtues—it makes it easier for me to tell you more." He hesitated, looked toward Miss Ocky as if for encouragement, received it in a short nod and added slowly, "I may as well begin with a circumstance that would probably have crystallized your suspicions of me if you had learned it for yourself."

"What was that?" asked the detective a bit impatiently.

"I was present at the murder," said Sherwood.

XX: H. Antaeus Krech

MISS Ocky, who had heard the story already, sat down on the rock and calmly waited its continuance, but Creighton's eyes narrowed.

"You were present! At the murder!"

"In the background only, I assure you," amended Sherwood, and plunged rather desperately into his account. "It is a habit of mine to grab my hat and stick and take a short walk every evening before going to bed, and that was how I came to be out that night. I had no special objective, and—and because old memories had been stirred by my return I almost unconsciously cut across the fields near my house and headed for that path which leads to this garden. I used to do that twenty-two years ago when—when there used to be some one to meet me right by this rock! Somehow, I felt as if I wanted to—to look at a certain lighted window before I turned in. I don't expect you to understand—"

"I do, however! What time was all this?"

"Half-past ten, roughly. When I got here, the only light burning was in Simon's study—otherwise the house was in darkness, which seemed to me an ironic commentary on my foolish gesture! The study light went out almost immediately, but I lingered on. I sat down on a fallen log in the deep shadow of those trees—there, to the right of the path—and began to think back to old times. One discovery I made was that I hated Simon Varr more than ever after all these years. Damaging confession, I suppose?"

"Twenty or thirty minutes must have passed. Then I heard a cautious step on the trail—and nearly fell off my log when a figure in the garb of a monk glided into the open. Rather weird! Sounds silly here, of course, but for a moment my hair stood on end. I had a notion that I was seeing a ghost!

"Before I recovered my wits, it—it happened! I had supposed Simon had gone to bed when his light went out, but now he appeared from around the corner of the house. It was obvious that he was stalking the monk. It was like watching a scene in a melodrama, and I couldn't have moved hand or foot to save my life. All of a sudden, Varr rushed him. I thought the fellow would run, but instead of that he waited. When Simon got close, the monk appeared to raise a sort of mask he wore. I heard Simon cry out something in a surprised voice, and then I saw a flash of steel as the monk threw up his arm and brought it down. Simon dropped to the ground and lay on his back—and the monk glided off down that trail before I realized that I had seen a murder!"

"Why didn't you chase him—holler—do *something*!" cried Miss Ocky.

"Couldn't seem to budge," said Sherwood briefly. He looked a little hurt. "If you think it was just cowardice you're jolly well mistaken! I had no sensation of fear at any time. You've heard the expression, 'rooted with amazement'? Well, I was it!

"I was still in that condition three minutes later, perhaps, when I heard another, heavier step on the trail. A man appeared, and from the way he walked I could tell he had been drinking. He staggered toward the body, but he was staring at the house and shaking his fist at it. He reeled off the cement path

and almost stumbled over Simon before he saw him. He gave a cry, and stooped to look closer—then turned and bolted for dear life and vanished down the trail. He had been scared sober!

"I began to get back my senses. The first thing I thought of was my own position and what I should do. If I were called on to account for my presence there it would involve the mention of Lucy's name if I told the truth—and to save my neck I couldn't think of a plausible lie! There was none to explain my presence in Varr's kitchen garden at eleven o'clock at night!

"I felt under no obligation to give the alarm—it never once occurred to me that the second man wasn't tearing hell-for-leather to the police-station with his story! I did, however, feel that I could not leave Simon lying there with a knife in him while there was a possibility of his being still alive. It took all the nerve I had, but I walked out and took a careful look at him. I knew enough about anatomy to see at once that he had been stabbed through the heart and must have died instantly. Then I lost no time in getting away—"

"You kept to this cement path?"

"Yes; I had sense enough to leave no tracks in that soft earth. I got home without meeting any one, and I hoped I would never be drawn into the case.

"It gave me a jolt when I found the crime had not been reported by that second man. The inquest reassured me when it seemed as if everybody was at a loss to know who had committed the murder. They could remain at a loss for all of me, so long as I wasn't brought into the case—and Lucy! Then, the next morning, the papers had the news of Maxon's arrest! I haven't slept much since!"

"I'm hardly surprised," said Creighton dryly. "Your story does one thing to the Queen's taste—it corroborates Maxon's description of his movements that evening. He was drunk when he broke jail, he had an hour or so to kill before meeting Drusilla Jones, and he staggered up here with the tipsy notion of wrecking the garden to spite old Varr. He was sobered by what he found, as you noticed, but even then didn't have sense enough to see that his best bet was to go straight to the police. He claims he never stopped to think how black appearances against him would be. Would you be able to swear that he was the man you saw here after the murder?"

"Yes. I went to court when he was examined and remanded and I recognized him beyond a shadow of doubt."

"And I'm to understand you've kept silent simply out of consideration for Mrs. Varr?"

"That weighs a good deal with me," said Sherwood quietly. "I haven't enjoyed these past nine days, Mr. Creighton. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I came to Miss Copley to tell her of my difficulty."

"And I advised him to talk with you and be guided by your instructions," threw in Miss Ocky.

"What had I better do?" asked Sherwood hopelessly.

"Do! There's a man in the county jail with an ugly charge hanging over him that a word from you will lift—and you ask me what to do!" Creighton was scandalized. "Go to Norvallis—instantly! Tell him the truth and let him decide how much publicity must attend the liberation of Maxon. I don't think he will insist upon much!"

"You're right, Mr. Creighton—but not helpful."

"Helpful! What did you expect?" snorted the detective indignantly. "Did you think I'd encourage you to let Maxon rot in jail just to humor your quixotic notions about gossip and a woman's name? I sympathize with your difficulty, but that's as far as I can go. There are two things I've never done and never expect to do knowingly—let an innocent man suffer unjustly or a guilty one escape!"

"At this point there was loud applause from the gallery!" murmured Miss Ocky in her soft, amused drawl, and brought him to earth. "Go on, Leslie, and do your duty. It can't be helped."

"Very well," said Mr. Sherwood unhappily, and got off the rock. "Nothing more you want to ask me, is there?"

"N-no," answered the detective, a bit subdued by Miss Ocky's rebuke. "Yes—one thing. What did this confounded monk look like?"

"Well, I can't help you much there. I got the impression that he wore a mask—as Miss Copley did when she saw him on the trail. He was dressed from head to foot in black. He even wore black gloves; it was an odd thing that made me notice that. Have you ever seen a man straighten up from some completed task and stand looking down at it, nodding his head and rubbing his hands together as if to say, 'Well, there's a good job over and done with'? That's what this fellow did as he stood above Simon—"

"Oh!" gasped Miss Ocky, and collapsed limply on the boulder, her face ashen. "Oh!"

"What is it?" snapped Creighton, wheeling upon her. "What is the matter?"

"It's all so ghastly—so—so cold-blooded!" she

managed to stammer. "Don't mind me. I'm all right."

"Um," said Creighton, eyeing her doubtfully. "You come into the house and get a rest before dinner! Good-day, Mr. Sherwood!"

He carried his point without much difficulty. He hovered over Miss Ocky until he had her safely in the house and on her way to her room, and for once her militant spirit seemed burned out. He reproached himself bitterly for having let her listen to Sherwood, though nobody could have foreseen that the noodle-pated idiot would start embroidering his story with graphically gruesome tidbits! Why hadn't he kept his fat head shut? Serve him right if Norvallis jumped *him* next and put him in the jug for political prestige! For a few minutes Creighton was almost cheerful as he pondered that possibility.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, Miss Ocky reappeared for dinner and impressed him as having entirely regained her composure. She was her usual gently mocking, always slightly cynical and amusing self. As the swift conversation flashed back and forth between them—past the apparently unconscious person of young Mr. Merrill—he gradually recovered his own equanimity and was quite himself again by the time he and Miss Ocky settled to coffee and cigarettes in the cozy corner of the veranda.

"Almost time for Mr. Krech to make his evening call," she suggested. "They dine earlier at the Bolts' than we do here."

"Queer thing about Krech," mused Creighton. "I've never seen him take so little interest in a case as he does in this. Usually he is at my heels from morning until night, spraying questions the way a

machine-gun sprays bullets. Now he just blows in—and presently blows out.”

“Oh!” said Miss Ocky. She sat up straight, scratched her chin meditatively with one slim forefinger, and darted him a look that he missed. “Mmph. Y-yes, that is queer.”

“Of course he’s devoted to his wife,” continued the detective, “and I suppose that distracts a man from the pursuit of a mere hobby.”

“Briefly,” said Miss Ocky. “Briefly!”

“A charming woman ought not to be cynical—” Creighton broke off and raised his hand. “He’s coming now; you can hear that car of Bolt’s six miles on a quiet night! Shall we tell him about Leslie Sherwood?—the poor chap hasn’t had anything so nourishing for a week.”

“Swear him to secrecy,” stipulated Miss Ocky.

Thus, when the big man appeared and dropped into a chair, he was duly pledged to discretion and informed of the fact that an eyewitness of the murder had turned up.

“My gosh!” he exclaimed when the details had been told. “Why, that just naturally blows Norvallis clean out of water! What’ll he do if he loses Mr. Vote-getter Maxon?”

“Pinch Sherwood,” chuckled Creighton. “That ought to net him even handsomer returns.”

“Oh—*no!*” cried Miss Ocky, and turned white. “Oh, I think it is simply disgraceful that such things can happen in a civilized country! Bad enough to be the subject of gossip and suspected of a crime, but to be actually imprisoned on mere suspicion—”

“I was only joking,” cut in the detective hastily. “Norvallis will make no such stupid blunder. I’m sorry to say there is a wide difference between what

can be done to a mere workingman and what may be done to a country gentleman of position."

"So much the worse!" snapped Miss Ocky unappeased.

"This lets out Charlie Maxon," muttered Krech, and regarded his friend morosely. "Seems to me, Creighton, that every time this case takes one step forward, it slides back two. Jason Bolt is getting fearfully down in the mouth. When this news reaches him it will be the finishing touch."

"I had a talk with him this afternoon," said the detective, and flicked his cigarette over the veranda rail. "Reminded him that Rome wasn't built in a day and that murderers aren't always caught in a night, that the darkest hour is just before the dawn, and dropped a few other comforting thoughts in similar vein. I also mentioned that one never knew in a case of this kind when something might happen—"

"It's happening now!"

Krech hissed the words in a fierce whisper. His eyes had automatically followed the detective's glowing cigarette and had been attracted by something farther off, barely visible through the deepening dusk. Almost before Miss Ocky and Creighton could sense the meaning of his words, he had sprung to his feet and vaulted the veranda railing. Thanks to a downhill slope of the ground at this point the piazza floor was a full nine feet from the grass lawn, and they heard a hearty grunt as Krech alighted. Then he recovered his footing and sped with extraordinary swiftness for so large a man across the sward in the direction of that woods that edged it.

"What is it?" gasped Miss Ocky. "Oh—what is it?"

"The monk!" cried Creighton. "The monk!"

His glance, darting ahead of the speeding Krech, had discerned an unmistakable figure outlined against a clump of white birch as though the monk had deliberately chosen a background against which he would be most conspicuous to the group on the piazza. He was standing there motionless, apparently indifferent to the rushing menace of Krech, and through the detective's brain, searing it like a flame, shot the memory of something Sherwood had said; "I thought the fellow would run, but instead of that he waited!" He was waiting now!

"Krech!" cried the detective. "*Careful—careful!*"

His hands were on the rail of the veranda. It had not taken two seconds for him to size the situation and shout his warning, and those same seconds were occupied in getting out of his chair and dashing to the rail. He had one leg over this when two hands like steel clamps circled his right arm and gripped him fiercely.

"Please—oh, *please!*" stammered a frightened voice.

"*Ocky!*" he gasped in furious protest. "*Leggo!*"

He wrenched himself free and went sprawling over the rail, a wordless prayer in his heart that no broken legs or sprained ankles were to be his portion. He landed unhurt in a providential flower-bed, and struggled again to his feet to discover that both the monk and Krech had vanished.

There was a little-used trail which commenced near the birch-trees and ran sharply downhill to the small house that Miss Ocky had donated to her nephew and his bride. Creighton knew of its existence, and never doubted now that the monk had

disappeared into it at the last moment with the impetuous Krech in full pursuit. He drew an electric torch from his hip-pocket as he raced for the dark entrance to the path, anxiety for his friend the paramount force that speeded his flying feet.

"Why did he try to jump him like that?" he thought. "If he had only used his head a bit! He could have sauntered into the house, out the back door, crept through the woods and taken the fellow in the rear. He has all the courage of a mad bull—and about as much sense."

This unkind summary of Krech's character was no sooner complete than Creighton himself was in the trail, plunging headlong down its sharp declivity with quite as much recklessness as his friend had shown, save the advantage of his flash. He played its powerful beam ahead of him as he ran and leaped, until twenty yards from the entrance he suddenly dug his heels hard into the rubble of the path to halt his wild career as the light showed him the body of a man lying face downward in the trail. Its bulk alone left no doubt of identity.

"*Hell!*" snapped the detective, and the one vicious word was the epitome of all that he felt.

With desperate haste he jammed the torch into a crotch of a small tree so that its rays illuminated the scene, then dropped to his knees beside the prone body of his friend, exerted all his strength and rolled it over on its back. His eager fingers, pressing, prodding, explored the still form throughout its length.

"No wounds—no broken bones," was his first relieved diagnosis. Then "Hello—here we are!" An angry red abrasion on the big man's forehead had caught his attention. He touched it, and smiled as

it elicited a groan from the victim that sounded to Creighton like celestial music. "A crack on the head—knocked him out!" he muttered, then raised his voice. "I say, Krech—come to, old man, come to!"

The adjuration seemed to penetrate Mr. Krech's dazed faculties. His eyes opened, blinked once or twice, opened again and stared tranquilly up into Creighton's. His lips moved and words issued.

"A fall like that," he observed calmly, "would have killed an ordinary man."

"Thank heaven!" ejaculated the detective fervently. "Are you much hurt? What happened?"

"Tripped—came down with a dirty wallop and cracked my head on something awfully hard." He raised himself cautiously to a sitting position and glanced about him. "That chunk of granite there—doesn't it look to you as if it were freshly broken?"

"I guess it was only this big root!" said Creighton, and laughed aloud in his relief. Then his mirth abruptly gave way to surprise. "Hello," he said. "Hello—hello—hello!"

He had been looking around too, and now he picked up a loose end of stout wire that was attached at one extremity to a sapling. There could be no question as to what it was doing there. Until Krech's shin had snapped it, it had been stretched taut across the trail a foot above the ground.

"Gee Joseph!" exclaimed the big man, staring at the simple apparatus of destruction. "Clever little hellion, ain't he?" He stood up, moved his arms and legs tentatively and gave himself a shake.

"All right?" asked Creighton quickly.

"Never felt better in my life. Little shaking-up like that—good for a man. Who was the ancient

johnnie that used to bounce up from the earth a bit stronger for every time he hit it?"

"Antæus," suggested the detective absently.

"Uh-huh. H. Antæus Krech—that's me." He added with more appropriate seriousness, "What became of our little playmate?"

"Search me," replied Creighton, still thoughtful. "I'm trying to figure out what was back of all this. It was a prearranged trap, of course. He showed himself deliberately, invited us to chase him, then arranged this wire to insure his get-away. But—why?"

"I can give you a good guess, Peter, my boy," said Krech slowly. "I think I have inadvertently saved your life."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Suppose you are getting too close to the truth of who killed Simon Varr—or suppose the murderer thinks you are, which comes to the same thing. He doesn't care for the idea—not a-tall. So he has a happy inspiration and plots this scenario as you have described it—only to draw an anticlimax. *You* were supposed to do the chasing. Naturally he couldn't foresee that your guardian angel, the unfortunate me, would come galloping down here and spring his trap.

"What if it had been you who was slumbering peacefully in the middle of the path instead of me? Would you ever have awakened again? Or would you now be sitting somewhere on a cloud talking it all over with Simon? How's that for a theory?"

"You think he'd have stuck a knife in me? I must admit there is a nasty air of plausibility about your sketch." The detective mused a moment.

"There's one consolation if it's true; it's mighty complimentary—almost flattering—to my ability!"

He stood up and rescued his torch from its resting-place in the tree. As he took it down, its beam was deflected briefly along the trail, and in that instant he uttered a quick exclamation.

"Look there!" he snapped. "What's that?"

XXI: Twilight

KRECH came to attention at the detective's exclamation and his eyes followed the ray of light from the torch as Creighton directed it to a point on the ground scarcely two yards from their feet. An oblong, flat package wrapped in brown paper lay in the trail. They dove for it together and Creighton secured it, properly enough, since the flash-light revealed his name on the face of it, scrawled in the same uncouth writing that they had seen before on the anonymous communication of the monk to Simon Varr.

"What's in it?" demanded Krech, and added a trifle anxiously, "It doesn't tick, does it?"

"That cropper you came evidently hasn't hurt your imagination," chuckled the detective as he loosened the coarse string about the package. "No, it isn't a bomb. It's—well, by golly, will you look at what it is!"

Very gingerly, holding it in the tips of his fingers, he lifted a red leather notebook from its nest of brown wrappings and showed it to Krech. The big man nearly dropped the torch which he had taken from his friend.

"Varr's notebook!" he cried. "It must be!"

"It is," confirmed Creighton, who had lifted one cover with the tip of a finger nail and glanced at the contents of a page. "Now, isn't this lovely! Who says we can't recover loot? The thief may have to hand it to us on a tray, but it's only results that count! Say, Krech—there goes your melodramatic theory of a plot to bump me off."

"I suppose so."

"He lured me down this trail so I'd find it, and to make sure I didn't miss it, he strung that wire where it would throw me with my face almost on the darn thing! You'd have seen it if you hadn't been knocked silly, and I'd have seen it if I'd been thinking of anything but you."

"He went to a lot of trouble that he could have spared himself for all of me!" grunted Krech, feeling his forehead. "I must look like the happy end of a barroom brawl. Why didn't he *mail* it?"

"By golly, I don't know. That's a mighty pertinent question, Mr. Krech. We'll get the answer when we get the crook, I expect. I'm not so fearfully surprised at getting back this notebook; did it ever strike you that there might be another explanation of its disappearance other than simple theft?"

"N-no. If there's another reason, I missed it."

"The dagger wasn't used to further the looting of Varr's desk. Just the contrary is the truth, I believe. The notebook was stolen to cover the theft of the dagger."

"Gee Joseph!" Krech whistled softly. "That checks up with the theory of an inside job! Creighton—*who?*"

"That's something I hope to find out pretty soon," replied the detective gravely. "Come on back to the house—and, listen! We lost sight of the monk. We hunted a while until you tripped and hurt your head, then we gave up the search and came home. Get it? Not another word!"

"Right," said the big man obediently.

There was no one on the veranda when they emerged from the woods. Two figures moved in

the lamp-lit hall as they entered the house. Bates came up to greet them nervously, and young Merrill lurked in the offing looking curious.

"Is everything all right, sir?" asked the butler timidly.

"Perfectly all right. Where is Miss Copley?"

"Retired, sir. She left word for you that she would not be down again this evening."

The news that she had left a message for him was welcome. He had been troubled by the recollection of the cavalier fashion in which he had shaken off her hand on his arm, and he was uncomfortably certain that in his haste he had addressed her, as he thought of her, by her family nickname.

"Go tap on her door, please, Bates, and tell her that I am back with nothing to report. Wait—take Mr. Krech up with you and show him my room. He has a forehead he wants to bathe."

The butler went off, and Krech, after a mild protest, accompanied him. Creighton, when they were out of sight, beckoned Merrill to follow and went swiftly into the living-room.

"Find out at once if any one has been absent from the house during the past hour. Let me know."

"Done it already, sir. Thought you'd want it. Only one person I haven't had my eye on."

"Who?"

"Janet Mackay, sir. She went to town immediately after dinner to a movie."

"*Janet Mackay!* There is only one motion-picture theater?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go there at once. Check up on her. She's a regular patron—the ticket-girl should be able to tell

you if she's been there. When you come back, signal to me, yes or no. Understand? *Beat it!*"

When Krech came down again he found Creighton sitting on the veranda, smoking a cigar and apparently more in the mood to think than to talk. It was nearly ten o'clock when a step sounded on the porch and Merrill sauntered into view.

"Pardon!" he said promptly, and vanished again.

But he had obeyed his instructions and sent Creighton a sign that started the detective's heart to thumping. Janet Mackay had not been to the theater. Here was a coil with collateral complications that were not pleasant to contemplate. His heart stopped thumping and made a dive for his boots as he wondered what Miss Ocky would say when she learned of his interest in Janet.

"I'm going to New York on the midnight," he said abruptly. "Will you run me to the station on your way home?"

"Sure. Unexpected, isn't it? What are you going for?"

"Mostly on account of this notebook." Creighton tapped the side-pocket of his coat in which he had placed his treasure, rewrapped and tied. "It must go to the chap in Brooklyn who does my finger-print work, and I don't care to trust it to the mail. I've another reason for going which I don't propose to tell you."

"*Sus domesticus!*" cried Mr. Krech proudly, then obligingly translated for his astonished companion. "Pig!"

"Oh. Well, if you feel so deeply about it I suppose I might toss you a hint. I'm going to New York to give something a chance to happen that might not happen if I stayed here. I'll be back to-morrow

evening, late—which reminds me that I'd better catch young Merrill and leave a message for Miss Ocky. Bates has probably gone to bed."

He spent the night at his apartment in the city and surprised his staff by entering his office the next morning at nine sharp—surprised them pleasantly, it may be added, for they had come to be loyal friends no less than faithful helpers. He exchanged cheerful greetings with a very pretty young woman who left her typewriter and accompanied him into his private room.

"Something diddling, Rose, I do believe." He seated himself at his handsome, flat-top desk. "Send Jimmy here. Get Kitty Doyle on the wire; tell her to pack a bag and stand by the telephone in case I need her."

A minute later he was smiling at the homely face of Jimmy Horton, his chief of staff.

"Got that notebook, Jimmy!" He slapped the brown package on his desk. "The story will have to wait. I want you to take this over to Martin yourself. Leave it there. Ask him to make every effort to bring out such prints as there may be on the covers. If he finds any, tell him to compare them with the assortment I sent him from Hambleton last week and see if any of them check. He is to telephone me his findings here, or wire them to me at Hambleton if I've gone back. Understand?"

"Perfectly. Does he mail you the book?"

"No. When he's through with it, you go back and get it. Be careful of it, Jimmy. If it comes to a choice of losing that book or losing your life, you hang on to the book."

"I get you!" grinned Jimmy. "Doesn't the recovery of this notebook technically end your com-

mission? We're up to our ears in work here. Why are you going back to Hambleton?"

"Because—because I darn well choose to!" Creighton writhed inwardly as he felt his cheeks growing hot. "On your way, young man—you ought to be under the East River by this time!"

Nevertheless, a certain compunction helped him to put the Varr case, and even Miss Ocky, out of his mind for the balance of the morning while he laboriously worked through an accumulation of other matters that had been waiting for his personal attention. At one o'clock he went to the basement of the building for a hurried lunch in the rathskeller, leaving word of his whereabouts with Rose.

It was well that he did so. With the coffee came an extension telephone that was plugged in at his elbow, and a distant voice spoke clearly in his ear.

"Merrill speaking. I'm telephoning from the railroad station. You guessed right, sir. The woman has just left for New York. Seemed a bit low in her mind—been crying and was still sniffing. She's wearing a dark-gray cloth dress—black oxfords—small black hat with a green feather—black fur neck-piece—brown leather suit-case— What's that, sir? No, sir!" Mr. Merrill's voice was gently reproachful. "She's not wearing the suit-case; she's carrying it. Yes, sir. I thought she acted rather queer—nervous, unhappy and fidgety."

"And no doubt she is! Thank you, Merrill. Good work!"

Creighton hung up the receiver, shook his head at the waiter who came for the instrument, then called an uptown number. A woman's voice answered—bright, alert, faintly tinged with a soft brogue.

"Miss Doyle speaking."

"Hello, Kitty! Did you pack that bag? Good. I want you to meet the train from Hambleton arriving four-thirty. Janet Mackay is on it. You can't miss her—listen!" He rattled off Merrill's description of the woman's dress. "Shadow her, Kitty; follow her to Kamchatka if you have to. Keep your eyes and ears open. Use your own judgment in regard to scraping up an acquaintance if an opportunity offers. She's dour, and probably a bit suspicious. I can give you one useful tip about her—she talks in her sleep. *Huh!* That will be all from you, Miss Doyle; it doesn't matter how I know. Wire me any news as you get it to Hambleton. Have you plenty of money?"

"Couple of hundred; I'll telegraph if I need more."

"Right. Whatever happens, Kitty—stay with her!"

"Like a Siamese twin," the bright voice assured him. "Is there anything special I'm to try and find out?"

"Well, you know the nature of this case." Creighton hesitated. "A confession would be very useful—if you could get it!"

"Crumbs!" gasped Miss Doyle. "Did *she* do it?"

"I have no definite proof—yet. There's just enough evidence to warrant our taking a warm interest in her. This sudden departure from Hambleton may be—flight!"

"Oh-ho. And she chose her time while you were here, thus avoiding any embarrassing farewell scene with you! Quite so. Leave her to me, Mr. Creighton. I'll wire you from Liverpool or Buenos Aires or Paris—"

"Or Hoboken or Harlem!" he corrected her. "Much more likely."

He sent away the telephone, ordered fresh coffee, lighted a cigarette and glanced at his watch. Two courses were open to him. He could put in the afternoon at the office and thereby clear up a lot of stuff for Rose and Jimmy, returning late to Hambleton as he had planned, or he could catch a train that would get him there just in time for dinner. Um.

He caught the train that was to get him there just in time for dinner. Bates, meeting him in the hall and relieving him of his bag, dashed his hopes forthwith.

"I'm afraid we weren't expecting you, sir," said the butler apologetically. "Miss Ocky is dining at Mrs. Bolt's. I'll have something ready for you in about half-an-hour, sir. Will that be all right, sir?"

"Fine, Bates; thank you."

"A judgment on me for my sins of omission!" he told himself philosophically. "I should have stayed on the job at the office."

He went and put his head in at the dining-room door, where Merrill had just commenced his solitary dinner. The young man signaled to him instantly that he had a communication to make. Bates had vanished to the upper floor with his bag, and when Creighton had assured himself that there was no one in the pantry, he stepped quickly to Merrill's side.

"I wanted to tell you that Miss Copley and the Mackay woman had a long talk in Miss Copley's room very late last night—or early this morning, rather. It was nearly four o'clock when Janet went to bed. They were talking about something very—well, *fiercely*. Almost quarreling. I couldn't make

out the words. That's all, sir; I should really have reported this to you over the wire."

"So you should, my boy, so you should," muttered Creighton absently. "No harm done this time, fortunately."

He slipped away before the butler should return, and went out to the veranda to wait until something had been prepared for him. He was glad of the brief opportunity to be alone with his thoughts.

Merrill's latest bit of information was disturbing in the extreme—so disturbing that he had to force his mind to consider a possibility from which it shrank aghast. The two women had "talked fiercely." They had "almost quarreled." *What about?* A hypothetical answer came to him so ugly that it chilled him to the bone.

Granted that Janet Mackay, from motives yet obscure, had killed Simon Varr, had Miss Ocky somehow learned the truth and become an accessory after the crime? Swayed by her dislike of Simon and her friendship for her companion of a score of years, had she condoned a crime and helped a murderess to escape? What was that she had once said? "Janet and I are fearfully responsible for each other!"

Oof! He took out his handkerchief and vigorously rubbed at the moist palms of his hands.

He had sat in this very same spot the night before and worried over Miss Ocky's probable reaction to a theory of Janet's guilt, but he had not dreamed of anything so terrible as this. Ocky an accessory! Finished with his palms, he shifted the handkerchief to his brow.

An unwelcome memory stirred in him of the scene the evening before when he had leaped the piazza rail in pursuit of the monk. He could feel

again her grip on his arm. Had she known that the black figure was Janet and sought to restrain him lest he catch her? Obvious! And he had ascribed that action to timidity or even—blatant ass!—to fear for his safety. Fear! As if October Copley knew the meaning of the word either for herself or any one else! “Afraid for his safety?” His cheeks were red as he spared a mirthless laugh for an egotistical idiot.

“Dinner is served, sir,” announced Bates, appearing in his silent fashion around the corner of the house. “It is not very elaborate, I’m afraid, sir.”

“It will be ample,” Creighton assured him, and added a trifle bitterly, “I don’t seem to have much appetite this evening.”

XXII: *A Cry in the Night*

DURING the progress of that mournful meal his discomfort was vastly increased by the sudden reflection that he was now confronted with a most disagreeable necessity. He bit his lip and frowned, strongly tempted deliberately to side-step a task so uncongenial.

No—he couldn't shirk it! Come what might, he would see this through and force himself to act in every respect as he would have acted were Ocky not involved. She was clean and straight herself, even if misguided loyalty to Janet had caused her momentarily to swerve from the narrow path of rectitude, and it would be no compliment to her if he were to scamp his job. Antagonists they might be in this contest of wits, but she was too sporting ever to want him to do aught but play the game for all that was in him.

"What time will Miss Copley be back?" he asked the butler.

"She said about ten, sir."

That would give him ample time for what he proposed to do. The dreary dinner ended, he went upstairs as though going to his room, but he did not get quite so far. The hall was empty. The house was still. He knew there was small chance of any one interrupting him while he worked.

Softly, he turned the knob of Miss Ocky's door, slipped inside and closed it again behind him. He crossed the room and drew the curtains of the French window before taking his torch from his pocket. Then, tight-lipped, he set to work.

An hour passed before his search, swift, silent and sure, approached its end. He had found nothing to incriminate Janet Mackay, nothing to connect her departure with any guilty knowledge thereof on the part of Miss Ocky. He smiled contentedly at the result, exulting in his failure, then sobered suddenly as the light from his torch, playing over her desk, discovered to him a neat, leather-bound book with the word "Diary" stamped in gold across its top cover.

A diary! Why in thunder did people keep 'em? Ocky had got the habit from keeping notes for her books, he supposed. Silly things, always getting their owners into trouble! He glared at the innocent book a full minute before he reluctantly opened it and sought the entries for the past few weeks. There were not many, thank goodness; she was not a faithful diarist. He scanned them rapidly, gathering courage as it grew plain that there was nothing here the whole world might not read. Then he caught his breath and stood transfixed at one entry, dated three days back, sped its message to his brain.

"The usual talk with P. C. last night from balcony to balcony. He is amusing and very entertaining—amazingly kind and sympathetic despite his profession, which must tend to harden a man—though he will not admit it!" So much was in her bold, firm writing, but underneath a line had been added in fainter, more uncertain script. "Why couldn't we have met twenty years ago!"

Creighton shut the book quickly, flicked off his torch, stood motionless in the dark. His breast was a chaos of wild, conflicting emotions. There was rejoicing at what he had found, loathing for the way he had found it, terror of the problems it portended. That regretful line in her diary revealed some feeling

for him, he felt sure, but what would become of that newborn sentiment when she learned that he had—

The raucous blare of a motor-horn from the direction of the driveway cut sharply through his abstraction. He leaped for the door and gained the hall in safety, then sauntered downstairs to find not one arrival but two. Miss Ocky had returned ahead of schedule, and a messenger on a motorcycle had come with a telegram.

"Telegram for Creighton."

"Right here." He scrawled a signature in the book, opened the wire and read it by his flash-light. "No answer."

He read it again as the boy putt-putted off into the darkness.

"We leave for Montreal to-night. Cheers. Can I have one on you? Address General Delivery, Montreal. K. Doyle."

He struck a match and held it to the corner of the yellow sheet. By the time it was burned and the charred fragments crunched beneath his heel, Miss Ocky had garaged the car and come around to the front steps.

"Hello," she said, rather wearily. "Never dreamed you'd be back already!"

"Couldn't stay away," he said lightly. "Have a nice time at the Bolts?"

"Rotten," answered Miss Ocky tersely. "My own fault—I've been low in my mind all day." She pulled off her driving gloves and waved with them toward the veranda. "Come and give me a cigarette."

"What has been worrying you?" he asked her

quietly when they were settled in the cozy corner.
"Anything serious?"

"Janet has gone. I shall miss her—terribly—after all these years. She insisted, though, and I had no right to refuse her."

"But she will miss you, too, surely."

"Possibly."

"She's going home to Scotland, I suppose?"

"N-no." Miss Ocky hesitated, then added calmly, "She is going to a sister in New Orleans."

"Oh," said Creighton, and it seemed to him that some one else must have uttered the word, so far away did it sound. "Very nice for her."

"Let's—forget her," suggested Miss Ocky.

There was no talk from balcony to balcony that night. Miss Ocky begged off on the plea of fatigue, and it was fairly evident that the plea was perfectly honest. She acted as if she were tired, she looked so, and Creighton, grimly comparing the fiction of New Orleans with the fact of Montreal, could no longer doubt that she had every reason to be tired, mentally and physically.

He was none too fit himself when he came down to breakfast the next morning after a miserable night's rest. He could scarcely eat anything. He rose from the table finally and sped into the front hall at the sound of a motorcycle, and when he accepted two wires from a messenger and dismissed him, his powers of resistance were pitifully inadequate to withstand the greatest shock he was ever to receive in all his life.

The first was a night-letter from Martin, the finger-print expert.

*"Numerous prints on cover of book. Fresh-
est superimposed on others are one of thumb*

top cover four of finger tips on bottom, made by number eight in collection you sent me. Characteristics distinctive. No possibility of error. Martin."

Number eight of the collection he had made! Made since the death of Simon Varr, then, and by some one in the household! Here was a tangible clue to the truth at last!

He took his memorandum book from his pocket and turned its pages with fingers that trembled slightly until he found the list that he had started with Betty Blake. Swiftly, his eyes went to number eight.

"No. 8. October Copley." That was the entry.

A full minute passed before he stooped and recovered the memorandum book which had slipped from his grasp, together with the second telegram. He shook his head impatiently in an effort to clear it of the stupor which numbed his brain.

Why should he be affected like this? he demanded angrily of himself. What was there here that couldn't be explained in the light of facts already known? It was no news to him now that Ocky was aiding Janet to escape the consequences of her crime, and it was plain enough what must have happened. She had found the notebook in Janet's possession, handled it cautiously and left those prints, then insisted upon its return to its rightful owners. That was all. His heart began to pound less violently, and presently he was opening the second telegram, which he saw at once was a straight wire from Kitty Doyle filed early that morning.

"Same compartment in sleeper. She had lower berth. Was very restless. Talked sev-

eral times. Could only hear one sentence, repeated frequently. Miss Ocky, why did you do it, why did you do it? She wired Hotel Beauclerc Montreal for reservation. K. Doyle."

"Miss Ocky, why did you do it, why did you do it?"

For a few moments that sentence written in letters of fire danced madly before his eyes. Then it cleared away and left him gazing at the peaceful woods beyond the patch of velvet lawn. His face was expressionless, but his lips moved slowly.

"That's it. That's it, of course. It's been there all the time. I knew it. I was just afraid to face it. Now—I've got to."

He was standing on the veranda, but he had an odd sense that his brain had detached itself from his body and was floating high in the air, whence it had a comprehensive, bird's-eye view of the whole situation. The chief actors in the drama were there, and as his brain watched them they dissolved briefly into mist, then reformed slowly into a sort of allegorical tableau.

There was Miss Ocky, arrayed in the somber robes of a monk, a stained dagger held loosely in her fingers, an illusive, faintly mocking smile on her lips. There was a great figure in white, a bandage about its eyes, leaning negligently on a long, two-edged sword, its calm, sightless face turned toward the woman in black. There was Janet Mackay, gaunt and ugly, interposing her thin body between the two, a pitifully inadequate shield. They all appeared to be waiting for something, and presently it was evident that the attention of the two women was centered on the figure of a funny little man whose

troubled eyes peered out from behind a huge pair of shell-rimmed glasses as he stood beside the goddess, hesitant, his hand stretched out to loose the bandage from the eyes of Justice.

The vision faded until only the funny little man was left. The watcher on high saw him turn and enter the house, calm and composed, putting two telegrams and a notebook into his pocket as he walked the length of the hall and into the pantry. His voice was placid when he spoke.

"Bates, fix me up a couple of sandwiches and a flask of black coffee. I've been a bit seedy lately and I'm going to try the effects of a long walk. I may not be back until quite late."

"Yes, sir. I'll have them in a few minutes, sir."

After an interminable wait of centuries, a neat package was forthcoming and he was at length able to leave the house and plunge into the woods, his destination the little cave in the hills where he and Miss Ocky had shared their picnic lunch. There he could be alone, secure from interruption, while two little devils, devised for the torment of man, donned the gloves and staged in the squared circle of his heart the age-old battle between love and duty.

It was a memorable fight, that. Love went down for the count of nine more than once, but more often it was the ugly little demon of duty that the end of a round left hanging on the ropes. Not until dusk had fallen was the referee able to hold up the arm of the victor.

It was ten o'clock when he limped wearily into the quiet house and slipped noiselessly to his room. His first glance was for his desk, where telegrams might be found if any had come. There were none, but a large white envelope, sealed but unaddressed, lay

on the blotting-pad. He took it up and ripped it open. Two letters, stamped and ready for mailing, fell on the desk. He stared at them indifferently, then picked them up and thrust them in his pocket.

He sat down, determined to act while his decision was fresh, and drew writing materials toward him. It was a very simple note that he intended to write, and it was just that when he finally finished it, but six false starts lay in the trash-basket beside his desk. He read over the completed product.

"My dear Mr. Bolt—Pressure of business recalls me to New York early to-morrow morning before I can have an opportunity to see you. I am happy to say that Mr. Varr's notebook has been recovered, under circumstances which I hereby authorize Mr. Krech to describe to you. I will send it to you by messenger. I regret that I cannot name the thief, whose identity, in my opinion, will never be learned. I shall look forward to seeing you when I again visit Hambleton, which I hope to do after a short period of work and rest. Sincerely yours, Peter Creighton."

He stood up, holding the open letter in his hand. His head was heavy. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he went to the French windows, pulled them open and stepped out on the balcony. Instantly, a low voice challenged him from the darkness.

"Mr. Creighton! I'm so glad! I thought you must be lost! I've been waiting here—! Please, will you do something for me?"

"I'm always ready for that, Miss Copley."

"I want you to come here. The door of my room is unlocked." The low voice grew even fainter. "I—I am very ill," said Miss Ocky.

XXIII: The Darkest Hour

EVERYTHING else faded from his mind at the emergency suggested by her last words. He was with her in five seconds. In that time she had retreated from the balcony and was lying back in a deep, upholstered armchair near the open window, a soft woolen lap-robe over her knees and tucked about her feet. He leaned over her anxiously.

"You are ill? What is it?" he questioned her swiftly. "Let me go for the doctor!"

"No—please! It isn't a case for a doctor—yet. I must talk to you first." There was a straight-backed chair close by, as though she had placed it there for him, and she waved him to it. She did not continue until he had reluctantly seated himself on its edge, bending forward to watch her face in the dim light from a single lamp across the room. "I—there is something I must tell you. Do you remember saying one evening that a detective must occasionally be a father-confessor as well as—"

"Stop!" He interrupted her, aghast, his tortured nerves rebelling against this unexpected, fresh flagellation. "I want no confession from you—I won't listen—!"

"Please! You must let me have my way in this; I have a good reason for insisting on that." Her voice was low, quiet and determined. "I want to tell you that your search is ended. It was I who—"

"Don't say it!" he broke in hoarsely. "I know it already!"

"You—*what?*" Her eyes were large, incredulous. "You know that it was I who—who killed Simon Varr?" Amazed, she saw him nod his head, and flinched from the gesture as if it were a blow. "How did you learn that?"

"A score of things pointed to it from the first," he answered miserably. "I would have seen the truth long since if—if something else had not blinded me to it. This morning my eyes were finally opened—" he fumbled in his pocket with shaking fingers—"by these!"

Miss Ocky took the two telegrams, held them shoulder-high to the light, and read them wonderingly. She exclaimed sharply over the one from Kitty Doyle.

"'K. Doyle'! Who is that?"

"A clever woman detective accompanying Janet Mackay—not to New Orleans, but to Montreal! I already knew her destination before you attempted to mislead me."

"A detective following Janet!" Her tone was a vigorous protest. "Oh, you must call her back! It isn't fair to Janet! Promise me you will call her back!"

"I will, at once. Kitty Doyle's usefulness there—is ended!"

She had raised herself slightly in her eagerness; now she relaxed again with a sigh of relief. Creighton, a dull ache in his heart, waited for her to resume the conversation. He would not take the lead.

"So Janet talked in her sleep!" To his horror, Miss Ocky was speaking in her amused, faintly mocking accents as though nothing mattered less than this gruesome discussion of how she came to be exposed. "In a Pullman, too; how very indiscreet! I should

have foreseen that and made her stick to day coaches. I knew her failing!"

"It was a paragraph in one of your books that revealed it to me," contributed Creighton gloomily. "You once described a bad night you spent due to your companion talking in her sleep. That enabled me to give my operative a tip."

"In one of my own books! The irony of fate, that! Please, Mr. Creighton, tell me why you happened to have Janet shadowed in the first place. What had she done to deserve this delicate attention? Is it possible that you suspected *her*?"

"I most certainly did." Chin cupped in both hands, his eyes fixed on the floor at his feet, he morosely supplied her with the salient features of the case as he had come upon them, from the discovery of the steel chip that pointed to an inside job to the moment when he learned that only Janet was missing from the house on the occasion of the monk's final appearance. "Then it developed that she hadn't been at the theater, as she was supposed to be. I argued from the return of the notebook that the case was drawing to a climax, so I went to New York to see if she would take advantage of my absence to slip away. When she did, it seemed pretty conclusive evidence of her guilt. I put Kitty Doyle on her track. Until this morning, the worst I thought of you was that your friendship for Janet had led you to condone her crime."

"Whereas the truth is exactly the reverse! Her friendship and my crime!" She gave a little shiver. "That chip from the dagger—interesting! It really started you on the right track, didn't it? I never knew I'd nicked the blade. Mmph. Extraordinary

what trifles may affect our destinies! Funny, don't you think?"

Each word she uttered in that whimsical tone was like a needle pricking his heart. He threw out his hands protestingly, suddenly groaning the very phrase that Janet had used in her troubled dreams.

"Miss Ocky, why did you do it? Why did you *do it*?"

"Yes, I must tell you about that." Her reply was cool, matter-of-fact, and he did not see that she winced at the pain in his voice. "After all, I can plead extenuating circumstances. I'll make it short as possible; you can ask questions later if you wish. Meanwhile, please don't interrupt me or I'll lose track of my story.

"I had been away from here twenty-two years. When I came back ten weeks ago I discovered a situation that I had never dreamed existed. Lucy's letters had never been especially happy or cheerful, but neither had they contained anything to give me even an inkling of the truth. I did not know she was married to a human vampire, a sort of—of spiritual leech! Words can't tell you the difference between the Lucy I left and the Lucy I returned to! It hurt me—oh, it hurt me!

"You won't put down all that I say about Simon to personal prejudice because you have heard enough about him from others to realize how mean and selfish and—and psychically cruel he could be. He never beat Lucy, but that was simply because he specialized in a more refined type of cruelty—and if you want to know which of the two hurts a woman most, there are plenty of unfortunate wives who can tell you!

"Simon owed everything he had in the world to

Lucy, for it was the money she brought to their marriage that enabled him to start his own tannery and gave him the opportunity to develop new processes that proved lucrative. Father disapproved of the match, but did not actively oppose it, and when he died shortly after, Simon's feet were on the road to fortune. Remember that, please!

"When I came home, I found he had completely broken Lucy's spirit and was deliberately trying to accomplish the same result in the case of his son. He had all but succeeded, too. Money seems to be the answer to practically every problem in this country to-day, so I was able to come to the boy's rescue. I told you one evening how I decided to put him on his feet, promote his elopement with Sheila Graham, who will make him an excellent wife—and incidentally put a spoke in Simon's wheel!

"I began to study my brother-in-law, and the more I learned about him the more shocked and fascinated I became. Satisfied with the lion's share of the income from the tannery, he refused to develop the business so that Jason's modicum might increase to reasonable proportions. He had always hated Jason since the panic of 1907 when he had to borrow money from him and give him a small interest in the business.

"He hated his manager, Graham, too, because he was beginning to be troublesome. Graham felt that his long and faithful services deserved some greater reward than a small raise in salary, and the one thing Simon could not bear to do was to reward a man according to his deserts! He decided to discharge Graham—but that did not prevent him from threatening Copley with the ruin of Sheila's father if he did not discontinue his attentions to the girl! Pretty?

"I was interested in the working conditions at the tannery, conditions that were unsanitary, primitive—obscene! I met the Maxon person in a grocery, as I told you, but it was before the strike, not after. He told me things, and even with a liberal discount for exaggeration, they were pretty bad.

"It was then I decided to take a hand in Simon's family and business affairs! I have a queer sense of humor at times, and it rather amused me to think of myself as a deputy of Destiny! And—and it just so happened that I was in a position to play fast and loose with no regard for possible consequences to myself.

"I opened my campaign by promoting that strike! I persuaded Maxon, a born agitator, to talk the men into doing it, and I provided him with money so they should not be broken by hardship. Afterwards I found he hypothecated this fund and spent it on a dance-hall girl, so I was obliged to send more money later, in a letter signed by the monk, to a more responsible treasurer! I was a little shocked when Maxon was accused of murder, but my spirit rejoiced at the thought of him in jail! *Snake!*

"The strike only brought out Simon's worst qualities of stubbornness and vindictiveness. He ordered a closed shop, and suspended a lot of innocent, needy clerks without pay. Except that it goaded him to fury, a pleasant achievement to contemplate, I had to write off my strike as a flash in the pan.

"I chanced to discover that Simon's heel of Achilles was his fear of death, so my next scheme was a pious plot to frighten him into behaving like a human being and a good citizen. I had known the legend of the monk all my life, of course, and it was while telling it to Janet one day that I was struck with the

idea of employing it to my own ends—though I afterwards pretended to Simon that I first heard of it from Sheila Graham.

“The next time I went to New York I purchased the costume and a pair of large boots from a theatrical supply store. I made a mask myself, and wired the cowl to stay up so that it would give the impression of a tall man. The large boots, of course, were to give a wrong idea of the man’s size in case I left tracks.

“Sometimes I kept the outfit in the bottom of a trunk in that closet, there, but more often it was hidden in a cubbyhole of my little house down the hill. There is a very ancient and disreputable typewriter in the attic, there, too, and I used that to write my messages on. I concealed that, by the way, under a loose piece of flooring just as a precaution, though I did not think then that a police case would ever grow out of what I was doing!

“I set the first fire in the tannery, and it fizzled out. Then I wrote my first note to Simon and waylaid him in the trail. I slipped off the disguise in the woods, ran to overtake him and pretended I, too, had seen a ‘ghost’. The next day I brought him that historical book and read him the legend, and I had real hopes of humanizing him when I saw how scared he was!

“I followed up this jolt by firing the tannery again, hoping that its destruction would necessitate the building of modern and proper quarters for the men to work in. I was nearly caught that time—Simon had the cunning to order his watchman to make double rounds!

“That night brought things to a sudden head. I had escaped from the tannery yard, run up into the

woods and shed my disguise, and came back to stand on the hill and watch the fire.

"It was then that Leslie Sherwood spoke to me and made no bones about expressing his hatred of Simon Varr. I was curious to know why he was so bitter, and I had a sneaking notion that it might have something to do with the way Leslie had suddenly deserted Hambleton and abandoned my sister to his only admitted rival. It did! I asked him to tell me the story back of it and he willingly complied.

"It appears that Simon clerked for a time in a local bank of which Leslie's father was the president, and while there had discovered old Mr. Sherwood guilty of serious defalcations. Sherwood was too deeply involved to extricate himself short of stupendous good luck and years of effort, so Simon cunningly stored away his knowledge against a day when it might come in useful. Blackmail.

"The occasion arrived quickly. Lucy was obviously attached to Leslie, if not secretly engaged to him. Simon went to Leslie and told him he must withdraw with no word of explanation to Lucy under penalty of having his father exposed as a thief! Leslie was knocked galley-west, of course. He went to his father, found that Simon had told the truth, had a row with the old gentleman and departed forthwith, stricken to his soul.

"I don't criticize Leslie for acting that way. He was obeying the queer standards of behavior we have set up in the West. Actually, it never once occurred to him that to kill a blackmailer of that type rather than permit him to ruin a woman's life might be a very righteous deed! I see you wince, Mr. Creighton! Please remember I have lived in the East long enough to imbibe some of its philosophy. I don't

consider one human life so much more important than the happiness of many other people!

"Simon's death warrant was nearly signed that night, though he was to have one more chance. I left Leslie and came home, and I won't even try to describe my feelings when I realized how that monster had used his power to sneak into this house and destroy Lucy's happiness!

"The dagger on the table caught my eye and I remembered its inscription. 'I Bring Peace'. Suggestive—very suggestive; I thought of the peace it would bring to a number of persons if any one had the courage to—to play Destiny. I thought of Leslie's expression when he told me he still loved Lucy devotedly, and of hers when she heard the news of his return. There were two more people who would find happiness if Simon were removed.

"I took the dagger, but of course that was dangerous by itself, so I slipped into the study, pried up the roll-top cover of Simon's desk and pounced a notebook that looked as if it must be valuable. Then I had still another idea—it seemed a good one then! The house was still, except for Bates snoring in the pantry. I went out on the piazza and forced the lock of one of the living-room windows with the dagger. Mmph! Wish I'd noticed that nick! I thought I was only leaving evidence of a burglary!

"The next evening I had a snappy talk with Simon. I told him that the death of old Sherwood—who succeeded in rehabilitating his fortunes before he died—had taken that particular curse off Leslie, and that Leslie had told me everything. Simon merely asked me what I was going to do about it. I suggested divorce—his last chance!—and he turned it down. Just from meanness and malice, he turned

it down. Blame me for anything you please, but don't sympathize with Simon; he asked for it!

"I knew a detective was coming on the morrow and I wasn't anxious to take more chances than I had to. The hour was striking—!

"Don't look at me like that! I won't go on with that part of it! Harrowing and gruesome, and not at all important.

"I'm afraid I didn't take either the police or you very seriously. More fool I! As I examined my position it seemed to me that I had left absolutely no clue, that I was secure from every suspicion. Mmph. I forgot Janet!

"She and I never had secrets from each other until this affair of Simon Varr. I had discussed him with her and she understood just what a blot on society he was, but I had not confessed to playing Destiny! After the murder, however, she learned of the monk who had been threatening Simon. She knew I detested him, she knew all my points of view, and her old mind began to work. Janet's mind is like the mills of the gods; it grinds slowly but exceeding fine.

"She watched me, questioned me slyly, and presently began a search for proof of her suspicions. She found the notebook in the back of one of my bureau drawers, and then she found the disguise in the house below the hill. She knew the truth!

"She has a Scotch conscience, which appears to be a terrible affliction! She was horrified at her discovery, almost sickened, but her loyalty to me rose above every other consideration. If she had only come to me—! But she didn't; she elected to follow certain impulses of her own conception.

"The most important thing, according to her strict notions, was that the stolen property should be

returned to its rightful owners. In wondering how best to do that, she evolved the crazy scheme of appearing in the monk's costume some time when I was with you. She could leave the notebook for you to find and at the same time provide me with a perfect and impervious alibi in case suspicion was ever directed my way!

"You know how it worked out. It's a miracle she didn't kill poor Mr. Krech! He looked very cunning in his bandage this evening!

"Of course, Janet gave herself away to me! When she came home late that night I had it out with her—and sent her away! I admired her loyalty and spirit, but she was entirely too dangerous to have around! I think Scotch consciences jump at odd angles like cats and detectives!

"That brings the story to date, Mr. Creighton. You know everything else, and the next move is yours." She leaned back and regarded him quietly, her little mocking smile on her lips. "What is the usual procedure? Do you make the arrest yourself? Or do you call the police? What a triumph you will enjoy over Norvallis!"

He did not reply in words. The answer lay on the floor beside his foot, where he had dropped the note to Jason Bolt which he had brought with him in his hurried dash to her side. He picked it up and gave it to her.

When she had read it, she let it drop in her lap. There was no mockery in her expression at that moment, though she could not forego a whimsical little taunt.

"That isn't practicing what you preach, Mr. Creighton!"

"I—I could not find the strength," he muttered hoarsely.

She made no verbal response to that, but her eyes blessed him. After a moment she forced one uncertain question from trembling lips.

"Will you tell me wh-why?"

"Yes. I've a confession to make, too, Miss Ocky." He nerved himself to this ordeal. "I—I searched your room last evening while you were at the Bolts. Looking for proof against Janet. Will you forgive me?" He waited for her quick nod. "I found nothing, but I did see your diary on that desk—and glanced at it."

"Ah!" said Miss Ocky, her cheeks stained a deep crimson.

"I found something there that interested me—made me—happy! A line wishing we had met twenty years ago. Will you tell me what you meant by that? I'm afraid to trust my own interpretation." He paused, but she remained silent. "Anyway, I echo the wish! But twenty years is not a lifetime. If you tell me what I want to hear, we can still have many years—to forget Simon and think only of our own happiness—"

"Oh, stop! Stop!" She flung out a hand imploringly and drew back from him, her face ashen. "Oh, what a fool I've been—what a wicked little fool! I saw this coming—I never should have let it happen—oh, I should have hit you over the head—k-killed you, too!—anything but let this go on! But I d-didn't have the s-trength either! I wanted my bit of happiness—I wanted to be cared for like—like that by some one—by—by *you* above all! And now—and now—!" She broke off on a sob.

"But, Ocky! What is it, dear? We have the future——"

"That's just what we haven't got!" she gasped. "Oh, don't you understand? Haven't you guessed why I have done all these things, why I was able to play Destiny without fear of the consequences to myself, why I called you in to-night to hear my confession?" She drew a sobbing breath, "I told you I was very ill. Peter, I—I'm *dying*!"

Softly though it was spoken, the word crashed upon his ears like a thunderclap. He sprang to his feet, shaken and bewildered.

"Ocky! What are you saying? Are you telling me the truth? What is the matter with you?"

"Yes. It's the truth. Sit down—please! Don't get silly ideas into your head about a doctor. Give me credit for some sense!" She managed to smile, and gallantly pitched her voice to a note of lightness. "As for what's the matter—well, we needn't wander off into pathology, need we? I think we'll dispense with an ante-post-mortem, if there is such an animal! I contrived to tie some of my little innards into bow-knots once when I was h-hunting hippopotamusses in the Himalayas, I guess.

"Months afterwards, I came down with a pain—a pain such as I could not have believed a human being could experience and survive; I went to a doctor in Paris, and he told me there was no hope. A few months later I had a second attack. When I was able to travel, I went to a new man in Rome. He said the next attack would be the—last.

"Then I came home. I wanted to see Lucy again, and if this stupid business of dying had to be gone through I wanted to do it here in this old house. I wanted a few weeks or months of peace and quiet

and h-happiness." Her voice broke, then steadied again. "Golly—what a fizzle!" She shivered. "This afternoon I got my—notice! How I wished you were here! I came up to my room, burned that diary—you snooped just in time, Peter!—and wrote two letters. I didn't dare leave the house to mail them. I might have dropped in the—*ah!*"

Swift as a flash of lightning it had come. Beyond that one moan she fought silently, lips tight, one hand clutching at her side, through seconds that seemed eternities to the man watching helplessly. At last the spasm passed and speech returned to her.

"That's—just a preliminary twinge!" she whispered between her teeth. "Peter—there's something beyond the stars! You believe that, don't you?"

"My dear—my dear!"

"That's all right, then." She looked at him long. "I wonder if you'll ever forgive me for hurting you like this. Try, won't you, Peter?" Her eyes were luminous with unshed tears. "Will you get me a glass of—water. On the table by my bed." She waited as he eagerly fetched it, grateful that he could do even this much. "Thanks. Now, a handkerchief—over there on the bureau." Again she waited, this time until he was across the room by her dressing-table. Then she raised the glass and spoke softly. "I'm glad I took this from *your* hands—Peter!"

She had not thought him capable of such quickness. Not a drop had passed her lips before he was upon her with the leap of a frightened deer. A vicious sweep of his hand sent the glass from her fingers out the window and through the moonlit night, to fall harmless on the lawn.

"Ocky—what were you doing?" he demanded almost furiously.

"Peter—what have you *done?*" she retorted. "That was all I had—all I had! Oh, that was a cruel of you! Why do you want me to suffer? Could you not let me die in peace?"

"You aren't going to die!" he cried. "Listen—how long will it be before another of those attacks comes on?"

"I—don't know. Several hours, p-perhaps." She stared at him open-eyed. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Local doctor, for temporary relief. To-morrow, the best diagnosticians—and surgeons if necessary—in New York." He was alert, now, coolly capable, free of the stupor of grief and despair. His face was grimly defiant as he added, "We'll see how much those gentlemen in Rome and Paris really know!"

"Oh—it's useless, Peter. And—and I *can't* live! They'll h-hang me! Peter, there's something I haven't told you. I hadn't stopped to think until lately that an unsolved crime leaves so much ugly suspicion in its wake! Innocent people—suspected all their lives! I couldn't die with that on my soul so—so this afternoon I wrote a full confession and mailed it to Norvallis—"

"Oh—*that!*" he said contemptuously. He reached into his pocket, plucked forth two letters and dropped them in her lap. "There!"

"Peter!" She stared at them. "Where on earth—? I couldn't go to town s-so I gave them to young Merrill to post. And he—he—"

"Is one of my men, introduced by Judge Taylor at my request! I'm glad you picked him, Ocky! He placed them on my desk, as in duty bound." He hesitated, eyeing her dubiously. "I'm going for that doctor—Joliffe, the chap your sister has had.

I liked his looks. First, though, I suppose I'll have to rouse Bates to mount guard over you!"

"No-no—not that! Whatever happens, let that be our secret!"

"You must promise me not to do anything foolish while I'm gone." He took one of her hands and clasped it tightly in both of his. "Ocky, keep your nerve, dear! I'm going to get you out of this—get you out *somehow*! Leave it to me, dear, and stop worrying. Now, promise me!"

"There's another thing, Peter; I ought to tell you while we have this opportunity to talk. Mr. Krech knows I—I did it!"

"Krech! *Krech*! How in thunder—"

"I don't know, but he does. It would have been funny last n-night if it hadn't been so tragic! He got me alone for a few minutes and began to drop hints; said you were practically certain of the criminal and that if he were the murderer he would do almost anything desperate to prevent himself from being caught, only he admitted he couldn't think of anything!"

"Will wonders never cease! However, we needn't bother our heads about Krech—I'd trust him with my life. Can't waste any more time on him now. Promise me, Ocky!"

"It's—no—use—"

"*Promise me!*"

"I—I promise, Peter!"

He bent and kissed her almost fiercely—and was gone.

XXIV: Beyond the Stars

THE next two hours for Peter Creighton were more like a nightmare than a nightmare itself. First he aroused Bates and startled the old man with the news of Miss Ocky's illness, and ordered him to call Lucy Varr and suggest that she go immediately to her sister. He could not bear the thought of Ocky sitting there alone with hideous memories of the past and fearful doubts of the future. Then he ran to the garage, jumped in the car and drove madly through the night to the home of Doctor Joliffe. The physician was an elderly and experienced man long-practiced in the art of turning out promptly for these midnight emergencies, and he was pulling on his trousers almost before the door-bell had ceased to ring, but to the anguished gaze of the detective he resembled nothing more than a languid snail with white whiskers. It seemed as if they would never get back to the house.

They finally did, and Joliffe took competent charge of the situation. Creighton, banished peremptorily, went into his room, extinguished the lamp, and sat down on the edge of his bed in the dark to await a verdict from the doctor. At each side of him his fingers gripped the corner of the mattress tensely.

He had not waited thus above fifteen minutes when he heard a familiar, heavy tread in the hall outside. His door was unceremoniously flung open and the space filled by a huge form.

"Creighton—you in here?"

"Hello, Krech. What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Haven't been sleeping well lately. Got up to smoke a cigar, looked out my bedroom window and saw this house lighted up. What's doing?"

"Miss Copley is seriously ill—perhaps—dying."

"The deuce!" ejaculated Krech, startled. He fumbled in his pocket, produced a match and struck it. "Mind if I light the lamp?" But the flickering flame of the match showed him a face so white and drawn that he caught his breath in sudden realization of the truth. He abandoned his idea of lighting the lamp and fumbled his way to a chair near the foot of the bed. "So—you *know!*" he said quietly.

"Yes," admitted the detective wearily. "But how did *you?*"

"I tumbled to it the night you went to New York," answered Krech, his voice anything but happy. "I didn't go home after I left you at the station. Came back here. You hinted something might happen if you went away and gave it a chance, and I didn't see why it shouldn't happen right away. I hoped the monk would turn up again; had a notion that my head would feel better if I could once get my hands on that wire-stretching humorist.

"I kept carefully out of sight in the woods and settled down at a point where I could watch both the kitchen garden and the spot where we'd last seen the monk. I waited three hours. If patience and perseverance make a good detective I was the best in the world that night.

"The reason I waited so long was that I was interested in a lighted window—Miss Ocky's. She was keeping pretty late hours, talking to Janet Mackay;

I recognized her tall, thin shadow as it occasionally fell on the blinds, and you know I had already suggested that there was something dubious about Janet because of her acquaintance with Charlie Maxon.

"That light didn't go out until three in the morning. A few minutes later I saw some one slip out the back door of the house and hurry across the garden to the trail. Janet! It was brilliant moonlight, you'll remember, and I recognized her at once.

"I followed her, keeping a cautious distance behind. Lost her once when she vanished from the trail into the woods, but she came back a minute or two later with a bundle under her arm that she had retrieved from some hiding-place. After that she took a bypath leading downhill in the direction of that poisonous little brook which runs through those meadows after passing the tannery.

"I watched her as she knelt down on the bank of the stream, weighted her bundle with a couple of rocks and hove it as far out as she could into the water. She stood watching the bubbles break above the spot where it disappeared, then turned and marched away erect as a grenadier and calm as a cucumber.

"I let her go, of course. My interest was centered in that stuff she had sunk, and I scurried around until I found a long pole. Then I started dredging operations that would have been a credit to De Lesseps himself—and brought ashore that bundle.

"You've guessed what it was. The monk's disguise, complete even to the shoes!

"You were gone, or I'd have brought the reeking mess to you. I couldn't smuggle it into Bolt's house without embarrassing explanations—after a dip in that brook, those clothes advertised their presence to

a distance of a hundred yards. Finally, I threw them back into the water, making careful note of the exact location, and went off to where I had left Jason's car.

"I was pretty well pleased with myself as I drove home. It seemed to me that I had solved the mystery of who killed Simon Varr, and it didn't injure my self-esteem any to think I had nailed the crime on the very person I had first suspected. Great work! I finally appeared before Jean all covered with mud and medals.

"It was when we were talking it over that the same awful idea came to us both. The more we thought it out, the less plausible seemed the theory of Janet's guilt. A sharper wit than hers had planned the murder. I told Jean about the long interview with Miss Ocky before Janet went out to destroy the evidence, and Jean groaned. It grew plain as a pike-staff that Janet was at worst an accomplice, and more probably only an accessory after the crime.

"Her abrupt departure the next day appeared to clinch this hypothesis. She—she would not betray her mistress and friend, but the shock of the discovery she must have made had proved too much for her. We figured she had either left voluntarily to— to pacify her own conscience, or at Miss Ocky's insistence because she was too dangerous to have around. And—and that's all, Creighton!"

It wasn't all, as no one knew better than the detective himself. There was something yet that had to be brought into the light and discussed. Moved to the very depths of his being, he reached out in the dark and dropped a hand gently on the big man's knee.

"Why didn't you tell me this at once, Krech?"

"I knew you'd ask that! Well, it was because Jean had some notion—and I did, for that matter—that if you learned the truth you'd—you'd get an awful jolt. We have both come to like Miss Ocky immensely, and I needn't tell you how we feel toward you! When it came to a choice of hurting you or condoning a crime we—we didn't hesitate long. Jean said if I ever let out a peep about what I'd seen that night, she'd divorce me—and, honestly, Creighton, I think she *meant* it!"

Some emotions do not lend themselves readily to verbal expression. Peter Creighton was silent, but there was eloquence in the tightening of his hand on Krech's knee. The big man spoke again, mournfully.

"Do you remember that afternoon at the tannery when I said I'd like just for once to find out something before you did? Well, I got my wish the other night—and I'd have given an arm to alter the meaning of what I'd found!"

"Thank you, Krech. You and Jean are two of the best friends a man ever had." The detective paused a moment, collecting his thoughts. "I expect you'd like to know how I stumbled on to the truth—? All right."

Though he was scarcely conscious of it, the telling of that story brought him some measure of relief. It eased the ordeal of waiting for news from the next room. He was forced to concentrate his thoughts on what he was saying to the exclusion of anxieties and fears, and shortly his chief concern was the clear presentation of his narrative.

He deemed it advisable that Krech, since he knew so much, should know all. The single incident he left untold was his dashing of the lethal glass from

Ocky's lips—that, as she had stipulated, should remain their own secret.

"You always manage to fool me, Creighton," said his friend as the detective ended. "I never guessed Merrill was your man, and I never dreamed that you knew about Janet's flight in time to wish Kitty Doyle on her. Jean and I would have bet any amount of money that you weren't within a hundred miles of the truth."

"Your bet would have been safe twenty-four hours ago."

"Now the question is—

Creighton suddenly sprang into activity. A door had opened and shut softly close at hand, a light foot-fall sounded from the hall, and the detective leaped to fling back his door as a set of bony knuckles was extended to rap on it.

Krech did not leave his chair, but his ears were strained to their limit. He caught various illuminating phrases from a brisk, capable little person with flowing white whiskers.

"Resting now . . . Opiates . . . Careful examination . . . Curious case . . . Similar one . . . Medical text books . . . To-morrow . . . MacNaughton . . . Billy MacNaughton . . . Best Man . . . Know Him? . . . Fine fellow . . . Exquisite touch with the knife . . . I will telegraph . . . No complications . . . No reason for excessive alarm . . . Very simple . . . Expert surgeon . . . Splendid constitution . . . Strong as a Shetland pony . . . Better go to bed yourself . . . Good-night . . . Tut-tut, don't mention it . . . *Good-night!*"

Creighton shut the door quietly, turned and lighted the lamp. Krech saw that much of the trouble had gone from his face—much, but not all.

"You heard what he said, Krech?"

"She's going to pull through?"

"He thinks so."

"That's good news. At least—I suppose it is."

"Huh? What in thunder do you *mean*?"

Krech deliberately lighted a fresh cigar before he answered, eyeing his friend steadily as he spoke.

"If she recovers, what will you do?" he asked calmly. "Hand her over to the police—as you should?"

Creighton stared at him. Then he suddenly swore—crisply, concisely, and without passion.

"That's all right, then!" said the big man with satisfaction. "I'll tell Jean just what you have said. In the event of your learning the truth, we felt some concern as to whether or not you'd be—be—"

"*What?*"

"Well—human!"

"Um." The detective gave a little laugh that was totally devoid of mirth. "Yes, I'm going to be—human! I fought that battle all day yesterday! I find that Ocky means more to me than—than honor, to put it bluntly and melodramatically."

"Cheers!" cried the unscrupulous Mr. Krech. "Loud cheers!"

"I came to another decision," continued Creighton seriously, "one that is dictated by common decency if nothing else. This is my last case. My shingle is coming down forthwith. I haven't met the acid test. I've quit under fire. I'm a deserter from the ranks. I'm—*through*!" He shook his head as Krech started to protest. "No. Whatever happens, that is definitely settled."

"Whatever happens," repeated the big man musingly, the phrase recalling him to certain practical

considerations. "Let's see. Jean and I know the truth; we're mum. Janet knows it; she's safe. How about Kitty Doyle? That young lady is sharper than a serpent's tooth, as I remember her! Suppose she tumbles to it? Will she join the conspiracy of silence?"

"I believe Kitty is a friend of mine," said Creighton, and added simply, "I'm singularly fortunate in my friends, Krech."

The next moment he jumped nervously as some one rapped gently on his door. He glanced at the big man appealingly, and sat down again on the edge of his bed.

"All right," grinned Krech. "Leave it to me!"

"A telegram for Mr. Creighton, sir," said Bates, as the door was opened to him. "The boy just brought it this minute."

"That must be something from Kitty now," muttered Creighton when the butler had gone. "Open it and read it, will you? My nerve has gone to pieces!" He shifted uneasily. "Hurry up!"

"Yes, it's from Kitty," confirmed Krech, opening the envelope and glancing at the signature on the message. "A long one, too. Here goes!" He held the paper under the lamp and began to read, casually at first, then rapidly as the import of the dispatch quickened his pulse.

"Arrived hotel. Secured room adjoining Janet. Bed early. Was restless, talkative. Unable distinguish words. Picked lock communicating door. Listened by bed. Incoherent. Suddenly awoke. Surprised me. I used own judgment as instructed. Made best of bad situation. Accused her of murder. Threatened her

with police. Terrible scene. Frantic denials followed by complete collapse. Full confession. Made lengthy synopsis. Obtained signature. Abruptly she seemed to go mad. Raved wildly. On point summoning assistance when violently attacked. Threw me in corner. Threw bureau on top of me. Before interference possible ran to open window. Jumped out. Six stories. Death instantaneous. Wire instructions. K. Doyle."

"Gee Joseph!" gasped Krech, and handed the telegram to the detective, who had sprung to his elbow long since and peered over his shoulder. The big man walked back to his chair and dropped into it limply. "I'm all unstarched!" he said plaintively. "Save my sanity and tell me what it's all about! How many people killed Simon Varr?"

"One!" answered Creighton grimly, but his eyes were shining. "Janet Mackay! And Ocky—Ocky thought she was dying—! She tried to shield Janet by assuming the guilt! Merciful Heaven, what a thing to do! No wonder she insisted on my recalling Kitty Doyle at once! Threatened to turn her sacrifice into a wasted gesture, Kitty did—and, by golly, Kitty *has*! But it wasn't wasted as far as we're concerned—we can always appreciate it! It was fine, Krech—fine!"

"But foolish," grunted Krech. "Think of the unhappiness she would have caused every one who is fond of her if she'd been allowed to roll up her reputation into a ball and kick it away!"

"Don't you suppose that thought hurt her?" cried Creighton. "If laying down your life for a friend exemplifies the greater love, what of a woman who

lays down her reputation? Isn't that even finer?"

"Y-yes. Perhaps you're right. But—she condoned a crime."

"Uh-huh. And I think you and I are in a nice position to criticize her, aren't we? Perhaps Jean might help us there!"

Creighton, carried out of himself by a *denouement* almost beyond belief, was close to laughter. Mr. Krech was not. He left his chair and began to saunter uncertainly around the room, pausing finally at the desk and staring down at its blotter, his back turned to his companion. A more neutral observer than the other, he thought he could see a question arising that had not yet occurred to the less-unprejudiced detective. But Creighton would stumble upon it eventually—far better to thrash it out now.

"Why did Janet kill Simon Varr?" he opened the subject.

"Why—why—" Creighton stammered, at a loss for a moment, but recovered himself swiftly as an answer came. "Don't you understand that? Her motive was the one Ocky professed! She was playing Destiny! She knew all about Varr—they discussed him at length—and she had always had a distaste for the man since the old days in this house. When Ocky told her the story of the monk, it was she who conceived the idea of the masquerade. It was she who knew Maxon's propensity for mischief-making and selected him as a deputy. It was she who threatened Simon, fired the tannery—but why go on? The two women are simply interchangeable, and Ocky had only to repeat in her own person the confession she forced from Janet—"

"Why was she so long suspecting Janet?"

"Huh? Well—if a murder is committed are you

apt to suspect a person you've known as well as you know yourself for twenty-five years? I've been wondering what first directed Ocky's suspicion to her companion, and I think I have the answer. The other day when Sherwood was describing the actions of the monk at the time of the murder, Ocky suddenly revealed a tremendous lot of emotion; depend upon it, something he said then must have given her a clue to the truth. And the incident of the fingerprints on the notebook—change one woman for the other and that is explained! It was not the cautious Janet that found the book in Ocky's bureau—it was the heedless Ocky who found it somewhere among Janet's things and never stopped to think that she was leaving prints when she picked it up!"

"But—this playing Destiny, as you call it. Ocky could do that without fear of the consequences, since she believed her days to be numbered, but could Janet?"

"Why not?" Creighton's voice was still confident but he had begun to look askance at his friend as he caught a hint of something more serious behind this inquisition. "Haven't we an explanation for that in Kitty's telegram? She says 'Janet seemed to go mad'. Isn't that the whole story after all? Janet was unbalanced; she pondered the cussedness of Varr; she fell victim to an obsession. She began to picture herself as a scourge of the unrighteous—she probably read up on Jael and Charlotte Corday and women like that. Her brain cracked. I'm not romancing, either. History is full of cold-blooded murders committed from motives of altruism. Common enough, both the cause and effect. Anyway, we have Janet's full confession coming to us—" He broke off short at an involuntary movement on the

part of his friend—and abruptly a fear crept into his eyes. “*Krech*—what are you thinking of?”

“The same thing you are, Creighton.”

“Put it into words!” commanded the detective fiercely.

“You’ve done it yourself. You have pointed out that the two women are interchangeable. So they are—even to the point where each makes what is tantamount to a dying statement! Ocky’s confession was convincing when you heard it, wasn’t it? Janet’s will be equally so when it arrives. Creighton—which are we to believe?”

“That’s it!” whispered Creighton. “That’s it!”

The big man came back slowly from the desk. They stared at each other blankly. The light had gone from the detective’s eyes, the new born life from his limbs. He felt weak and beaten as he contemplated this fresh perplexity. He moistened his lips before he could speak.

“It—it seems to resolve itself into a problem in psychology,” he said wearily. “No definite, tangible proof either way. Janet was perhaps the more likely of the two to commit murder—I know something of that dour Scotch temperament and its slow-burning fire that suddenly explodes into flame. She traveled with Ocky and imbibed her own share of Oriental fatalism. On the other hand, Ocky was far the cleverer of the two, there’s no denying that. Hers would be the brain more apt to conceive the masquerade of the monk, the promotion of the strike, the concoction of that note with its queer phrases—‘stiff-necked son of Belial’, ‘thunderbolts of wrath’—all that stuff. Yet again, those are just the expressions Janet might use if she were afflicted with a semi-religious mania! But Ocky was better equipped

mentally to carry the scheme through; that took a cool head, and Janet, from Kitty's account, was rather of the emotional, high-strung, hysterical type. Oh—!" Creighton raised his two hands and dropped them despairingly. "Krech—I'm just going around in circles!"

"There's no other place *to go*," declared the big man morosely. "But I disagree with your last description of Janet. She may have been hysterical in Montreal but she was cool enough the last time I saw her. The way she marched down to that brook with evidence of a first degree murder under her arm! And the way she stood watching the bubbles, nodding her head and rubbing her hands together as if to say, 'Well, *that's* a good job done!'—Creighton! *What is it?*"

The detective did not reply. Perhaps he could not trust his voice, perhaps he wished to enjoy in silence the wave of happiness and exquisite relief that flooded his breast. He rose abruptly, and further to conceal his emotion he walked to the French window and flung it open.

The night was gone. The eastern sky was a blaze of crimson glory. Some of its radiance was reflected from his face as he draw a deep breath of the fresh morning air.

"Hullo," he said huskily. "It—it's dawn!"

THE END







DATE DUE

--	--	--

THE KING'S LIBRARY



3000105383



